

Sexual boundaries: a guide for patients

This guide is for patients and those close to them – for example, parents and carers. If you feel uncomfortable about the way a health professional is acting towards you or if you have strong feelings towards them you can protect yourself and them from harm.

Crossing sexual boundaries includes unwanted sexual humour, innuendo, unnecessary examinations, not seeking consent for contact or sexual assault.

Your health professional is in a position of power for a number of reasons:

- They hold personal information about you
- They know the level of intimacy and physical contact that is needed for your diagnosis and treatment
- They know what is professionally appropriate whereas you may not
- You may be alone with them

This can put you in a vulnerable position. Being a patient, particularly over a long period of time, can make you feel dependent and in need of affection.

Five steps to protect yourself

It's important that you understand what is happening to you and why at every stage. Always ask for explanation if you are unsure. This will help to avoid any doubt or misunderstanding. It will also help to ensure that the boundaries between you both remain clear.

- Ask if you are unsure why something is being done to you
- Ask the healthcare professional why they need to do something if it makes you feel uncomfortable or embarrassed
- Ask if you would like someone to be present with you during an examination
- Ask for a private place to change.
- Ask for help from the healthcare professional's colleague or manager if you feel that they have acted sexually towards you.

Remember, it is their professional responsibility to treat you with respect and to keep boundaries clear.

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Your Feelings

If you feel you are developing feelings for your healthcare professional talk to someone and seek advice. If your feelings are getting in the way of treatment or making you feel uncomfortable with the healthcare professional, it may be better to transfer your care to someone else. If you feel able to talk openly to the professional, they should help direct you to an alternative source of care. Otherwise, seek advice from another member of the healthcare team.

Healthcare professionals are strictly not allowed have sexual relationships with current patients, even if the patient agrees. In many cases, a relationship with a former patient is also inappropriate.

Tell someone if things go wrong

Seek help and advise if you think that your healthcare professional has acted sexually towards you:

- If you have been sexually assaulted you should contact the police
- For other serious cases such as inappropriate touching you should alert the professional's employer or regulatory body
- For other issues such as inappropriate sexual humour you should talk to someone who works with your healthcare worker

Further information

More detailed information about this subject, including how to report an incident and where to find support and help, can be found in Clear Sexual boundaries between healthcare professionals and patients – information for patients and carers which is on CHRE's website (www.chre.org.uk). Paper copies are available on request from CHRE.