

Clear sexual boundaries between health professionals and patients

Policy summary

We have produced guidance for patients, health professionals, fitness to practise panellists and training bodies about clear sexual boundaries between patients and health professionals.

Background

The vast majority of health professionals work with dedication and integrity and are committed to the best possible patient care. However, in a small minority of cases, health professionals have seriously breached sexual boundaries, resulting in serious harm to patients or their carers, as well as damaging the public's trust in the health professions.

In order to protect patients and the public, it is important that health professionals are aware of the importance of sexual boundaries, that they understand what is appropriate or inappropriate in the healthcare professional/patient relationship, and that they are know what to do if they suspect a colleague has breached sexual boundaries with a patient.

It is also important that patients understand what to expect when they visit a health professional and what to do if they feel uncomfortable with a professional's behaviour or want to make a complaint.

Following an inquiry into cases of serious sexual misconduct by health professionals, the Department of Health asked us to produce guidance for the regulatory bodies on sexual boundary issues in order to help safeguard patients and the public.

What did we do?

We looked at research that had already taken place on the subject, gathering all the evidence into a literature review document. This included information about the number of sexual boundary breaches, the impact these had on patients and the warning signs

that might indicate that a breach of sexual boundaries could take place.

We consulted a network of stakeholders. These included the health professional regulators, patient representative organisations, professional bodies, education institutions and employer organisations.

What was the outcome?

In January 2008 we published three documents which contained guidance and recommendations on issues relating to clear sexual boundaries between health professionals and patients.

- *Clear sexual boundaries between healthcare professionals and patients: responsibilities of healthcare professionals*

This sets out health professionals' responsibilities in relation to maintaining clear sexual boundaries with their patients. It also contains guidance on what healthcare professionals should do if they suspect that a colleague has breached sexual boundaries with a patient. We circulated this document to the regulators to inform their own guidance for registrants.

- *Clear sexual boundaries between healthcare professionals and patients: guidance for fitness to practise panels*

Complaints about health professionals are dealt with by the regulators' fitness to practise panels. This document provides information for panel members on the special considerations they should bear in mind when hearing a case involving an alleged sexual boundary breach. It gives guidance on the training that panel members

should receive. It also outlines areas they should consider when determining what action should be taken if they find that a health professional has breached sexual boundaries.

- *Learning about sexual boundaries between healthcare professionals and patients: a report on education and training*

This looks at the way students who are training to become health professionals are taught about sexual boundaries and appropriate standards of behaviour and conduct. It includes examples of good practice and recommendations to higher education institutes, students, regulators, Royal Colleges and the Department of Health on how training in this area can be made more effective.

In April 2009 we published jointly with NHS Employers a further document for patients and the public:

- *Clear sexual boundaries between healthcare professionals and patients: information for patients and carers*

This contains guidance for patients and carers on clear sexual boundaries. It sets

out how patients can protect themselves against health professionals who breach sexual boundaries, and where they can seek help if they are concerned about a health professional's behaviour.

We produced a leaflet which summarised the key information. Our advice to patients includes the following:

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

All of these documents, including a literature review are available on our website, www.chre.org.uk

For further information, please visit www.chre.org.uk

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