

GP suspended after harassing patient when he ended the relationship



Key messages from the case

Having a sexual relationship with a current patient is always unethical and harmful. Even if the relationship is consensual it has the potential to harm the patient and interfere with their medical care. Blurring the boundaries of a therapeutic relationship can impair the doctor's professional judgement, as this case illustrates.

Details of the decision

Boundary violation

Dr D was treating Mr C for depression, anxiety and difficulty sleeping.

Mr C met Dr D privately outside the medical practice to seek her support for an education project relating to his experience of depression. They began a personal and sexual relationship that continued for about 5 months.

When Mr C terminated the relationship with Dr D she continued to contact him by text message. She made derogatory and belittling remarks including that he was impotent and unable to sexually satisfy her. Eventually Mr C lodged a complaint.

Treating family and friends

Dr D did not refer Mr C to another practitioner when they began a relationship. Medical records indicate she continued to provide medical care to Mr C while they were in a relationship.

She accepted that she should have referred him to another practitioner and that failing to do so was unprofessional.

Outcome

Dr D admitted that her behaviour amounted to professional misconduct.

The tribunal accepted that Dr D's judgement at the time was compromised due to her own mental health issues. However, the boundary violation was aggravated by her sending belittling and derogatory text messages – conduct that the tribunal denounced as "disgraceful".

Dr D and the Medical Board agreed on proposed sanctions, which the tribunal accepted as appropriate. Dr D's registration was suspended for 6 months. She was reprimanded and required to undertake mentoring and education on boundary violations and practising with an impairment.

Key lessons

It is never appropriate to have a sexual relationship with a current patient, even if you believe the relationship is consensual.

Wherever possible avoid treating those with whom you have a close personal relationship except in an emergency.

Be aware of your own health and wellbeing. Having relationship problems, feeling personally or professionally isolated, being under stress or unwell may make you more vulnerable to boundary breaches. Take active steps to seek professional support – for example ensure that you have your own GP, find a mentor or peer support network.

References and further reading

Avant factsheet: [Boundary issues](#)

Medical Board of Australia Guidelines: [Sexual boundaries in the doctor-patient relationship](#)

Avant article: ["But it's just a script": prescribing requests from family and friends](#)

Avant factsheet: [Treating family members, friends or staff](#)

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