

## Paediatrician suspended over inappropriate behaviour with patient's mother



### Key messages from the case

It is essential to maintain professional boundaries with patients and with those close to them, such as parents, carers and other family members who may need to make decisions of the patient's behalf. They need to trust that the doctor is acting in the best interests of the patient and is not motivated by other considerations. A case involving a paediatrician highlights the risks of blurred boundaries.

### Details of the decision

#### Boundary violation with patient's mother

Patient A, a child, was diagnosed with multiple issues including extreme hyperactivity. His mother took him to see Dr G several times between the ages of four and five. During one consultation, patient A was particularly disruptive and defiant – frequently running out of the consulting room. His mother became emotional when Dr G asked her how things were going at home.

She alleged Dr G sent patient A out of the room then shut the door, sat her down and rubbed her shoulder then leaned over and kissed her on the top of her head. She claimed he suggested she return after hours, without the patient, 'to discuss strategies' and said that he would not bill her. She also claimed he locked the door and when she went over to open it, he led her to a corner of the room, put his arms around her and attempted to kiss her on the lips.

Straight after the consultation, the mother discussed the incident with family members, who advised her to go to the police. She also rang and complained to the practice manager.

Dr G denied any inappropriate contact, claiming he shook her hand and patted her on the upper back as a form of reassurance. He also denied locking the door.

#### Outcome

The tribunal accepted the mother's evidence. It found no evidence of other improper conduct and took into account that the conduct occurred on a single day. The tribunal noted that Dr G had undertaken training and reviewed the way he interacted with patients.

The tribunal found that Dr G's behaviour constituted unsatisfactory professional conduct and professional misconduct.

He was given a reprimand and suspended for three months.

## Key lessons

Take care in your interactions with a patient's family members, especially when the patient or relative is particularly vulnerable or dependent.

Instigating sexual contact or a sexual relationship with someone close to the patient, such as a parent, is unprofessional and unethical. Family members need to be able to trust that doctors will act in the patient's best interests.

While it may be appropriate to express empathy for patients and their family members, be very careful to maintain professional boundaries and avoid actions or comments that could be misconstrued.

## References and further reading

Avant factsheet – [Boundary issues](#) 2020

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

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