

## **Sexual Boundaries Between Patients and Healthcare Providers**

The relationship between a health care provider and a patient is a professional relationship based on trust. When a provider behaves in such a way that oversteps his or her professional role with the patient to create a personal relationship, we say that a professional *boundary* has been crossed. When a provider inappropriately uses words or actions of a sexual nature with a patient, a *sexual boundary has been violated*. This includes any words, actions or behavior that could reasonably be interpreted as sexually inappropriate or unprofessional. This is why, for example, a provider must leave the room when a patient is undressing for an examination. The potential for sexual misconduct exists with any health care provider.

According to the statistics identified in our most recent annual report, there were forty-six (46) allegations of sexual misconduct made against health care providers in 2006. This is a serious violation and all allegations of sexual misconduct are investigated thoroughly. An allegation, however, is a formal accusation of such conduct by a patient. While some allegations are found to be without a basis in fact, many are found to be supported by the facts. The 2006 report identified 22 allegations of sexual misconduct against medical doctors and doctors of osteopathic medicine (M.D.s and D.O.s) and 16 allegations against three mental health professions (counselors, psychologists and social workers). There were also 8 allegations filed against various other health professions.

Unfortunately, these 2006 allegations likely represent only a portion of such violations occurring in Michigan that year, as it is well known that many patients do not report violations of this nature due to embarrassment or fear of not being believed. In fact, according to the American Medical Association, the percentage of physicians who have crossed sexual boundaries with patients may be as high as 10%. The allegation statistics from our 2006 annual report indicate that less than 1% of licensed health professionals may have crossed sexual boundaries with their patients.

Violations of sexual boundaries between a provider and his or her patient include beginning a personal relationship during or after treatment, engaging in sexual activity, discussing sexual matters that are not relevant to treatment, using “off color” humor or telling “dirty jokes”, or repeatedly engaging in prolonged conversation about personal matters unrelated to treatment.

There are many harmful consequences to the patient when sexual boundaries are violated, including emotional turmoil, shame, fear, rage, guilt, self blame, identity confusion, sexual dysfunction, depression, self harm, and even suicide. It is sometimes difficult to know when a provider has violated a personal or sexual boundary. To protect yourself against this type of behavior, be wary if a health practitioner begins to disclose personal problems or discusses personal details regarding their love life, offers to not charge for appointments, explores any kind of relationship outside the provider-patient relationship, such as a business partnership or exchanging personal favors.

If you or someone you know has been a victim of sexual misconduct by a health professional, you should report it immediately to the appropriate licensing board. Remember, this type of behavior by health professionals may be quite rare, but it does occur. If you have questions about this article, staff in our Allegation Section may be able to answer your questions. They may be reached at 517-373-9196.