



Sexual Boundaries, Part II

Roland W. Gray, M.D.

Sexual boundary violations are a serious threat to a physician's career. Open, honest discussion among physicians is necessary to combat this issue that is so uncomfortable for us to discuss. Through education and understanding of the roots of sexual boundary issues, physicians can make a major contribution to patient safety as well as to our own health and emotional well-being.

Professional Consequences

The professional consequences of sexual misconduct on the part of physicians can be severe, even leading to disciplinary action on the part of the Board of Medical Examiners. The BME may restrict, suspend or revoke the license of a physician upon a determination that a physician has engaged in sexual misconduct. The BME's first responsibility in these cases is to protect the public.

Physicians with or without BME sanctions can turn to the PHP for help, which may be in the form of education in a CME class or referral for treatment and advocacy during their return to practice. Like any other condition we deal with, the earlier the PHP can get involved, the better.

Teaching Awareness of Sexual Boundary Issues

The Physicians Health Program receives a growing number of referrals for sexual boundary issues every year. What was once a very rare referral has unfortunately grown into a more common cause of referral. Sexual boundary problems may also be revealed during the PHP assessment phase of a physician referred to the program for another purpose. Recognition of the issue was the first step towards development of an educational course, entitled *Maintaining Proper Boundaries*, currently available through Vanderbilt University that helps physicians address this emerging problem.

As a rule, physicians do not receive adequate education about sexual boundary issues in medical school, nor are they generally aware of the AMA guidelines for sexual boundary issues. Education is a critical element in helping physicians who have difficulty with boundary issues. Critical elements of physician sexual boundary education include:

1. Understanding sexual boundary issues and the importance of prevention, detection and treatment of sexual addiction.

2. Discussion of healthy sexuality and appropriate boundaries among staff, colleagues, and patients.
3. Identification of risk factors in the education and training of physicians who have violated sexual boundaries.
4. Review of the socialization in medical school and residency training that may contribute to boundary violations.
5. Identification of family of origin issues and core personality factors that may contribute to sexual boundary violations.
6. Review of office organization and policies that establish non-sexual and sexual boundaries.

It's important for us as physicians to understand that we do not have to suffer the confusion and frustration that often accompanies sexual boundary issues alone. The PHP is available to work with physicians struggling with sexual boundary issues. We must eliminate the shame that often accompanies sexual boundary issues in our own lives. We would do no less for any of our patients.

Physicians can easily access the TMF Physicians Health Program by calling (615) 467-6411 or writing the TMF, 216 Centerview Drive, Suite 304, Nashville, TN, 37027. All communications to the program are strictly confidential.

To make a tax deductible contribution to the Physicians Health Program, contact TMF Administrator Michael Todd at (615) 467-6411 or write to the Tennessee Medical Foundation, 216 Centerview Drive, Suite 304, Brentwood, TN 37027.