Professional Boundaries

Introduction

The doctor patient relationship is a professional one. It is governed by a framework which enables the physician to gain the patient’s confidence and to occupy a place in the patient’s life as a provider of health and healing. Some of the attributes of this relationship, such as confidentiality and respect for patient autonomy, are well discussed and carefully established in each professional encounter. Less often discussed, however, are topics such as friendship, affection, love, and sexuality. These very personal and very human realities have the potential to enhance the doctor-patient relationship and lead to greater esteem and healing. They also have the potential to lead to breaches of trust and great harm for both doctor and patient. In this unit we will discuss how physicians can develop a capacity for relationships with patients that allow both to experience the humanity of medicine.

Objectives

At the end of this unit you will be able to:

1. Explain the ethical and professional principles which guide the doctor patient relationship.
2. Analyze various professional dilemmas involving intimate relationships, conflicts of interest, and relational boundaries.
3. Practice communicating these boundaries to patient and families in a professional and compassionate manner.

Preparation

1. Read the required articles found below.
2. Read the scenarios on the cases page.

Process

1. Class begins in Lecture with a brief presentation by Dr. Vetrano
2. In section continue to discuss the cases and readings.
3. Discuss with one another and with section faculty what strategies one might use to explain professional boundaries to patients.
4. In this area of medicine the role of intuition is especially valuable. It will be helpful to have section participants disclose their first reaction to the cases and then attempt to explain their reactions.
5. Role play may be especially helpful today. Feel free also to vary the details of the cases to see how this might impact the group’s evaluation.

Study Questions

1. Explain the role of power, consent, and professional frame keeping in the doctor-patient relationship.
2. What are the consequences of professional misconduct in the doctor patient relationship?
3. What steps can doctors take to insure that professional boundaries are maintained?
4. See individual questions for each case scenario.

**Articles on File**

**Required Reading:**
1. Professional Boundaries in the Physician-Patient Relationship, Glen Gabbard and Carol Naberson, JAMA May 10, 1995
2. Kathy Cole-Kelly, Can Friends Become Patients, American Family Physician, June 1, 2002
3. Ambiguous Gifts, Denis Grady, NY Times Jan. 11, 2004
4. Physicians Disciplined for Sex-Related Offenses Christine E. Dehlendorf, BSc; Sidney M. Wolfe, MD JAMA. 1998;279:1883-1888 Lot’s of statistics are no one’s favorite thing but this is worth a look. It helps us to see where things go wrong and why in at least one venue.
5. Sexual Boundaries and Physicians, William Swaggert, Brunner – Routlege

**Recommended Reading:**
7. Katherine H. Hall, Sexualization of the Doctor Patient Relationship: Is it ever ethically permissible. Family Practice Vol 18 No. 5 2001 (This reading contains an excellent description of thinking on professional boundaries.)

**Resource Links**
- AMA Code of Ethics on Sexual Misconduct in the Practice of Medicine
- AMA Code of Ethics on Sexual Misconduct in Relations with Key Third Parties