

# Policy Statement 6.5.2 – Professional Boundaries<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1. A strong dentist – patient relationship is central to the practice of dentistry and is essential for the delivery of high-quality dental care.
- 1.2. The relationship between dentists and their patients involves a unique position of trust. The quality of this relationship is influenced by the level of trust between the dentist and the patient.
- 1.3. There can be a power imbalance between the dentist and patient due to the dentist’s position of authority and the patient’s vulnerability because of the unequal knowledge base and their possible need to establish a level of trust in the dentist quickly.
- 1.4. Most dentists provide dental treatment for family, friends, colleagues and acquaintances.
- 1.5. There is a need to separate the professional relationship from other personal, religious, cultural, business and emotional interactions. The Code of Conduct of the Board describes the professional behaviour requirements for dentists. The Code of Ethics of Australian Dental Association (ADA), also describes what contributes to this aspect of professional behaviour.
- 1.6. States and Territories are responsible for child protection legislation.

### Definitions

- 1.7. The BOARD is the Dental Board of Australia.
- 1.8. BOUNDARY CROSSING occurs when a dentist initiates a behaviour or allows a behaviour to persist in a relationship that compromises or sets a future course that compromises the dentist’s relationship with his or her patient.
- 1.9. BOUNDARY VIOLATION occurs when the nature of the therapeutic relationship moves from a professional relationship to a damaging personal interaction or behaviour, including sexual and non-sexual misconduct.
- 1.10. PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARY is the implicit or explicit demarcation separating the professional relationship with a patient from other personal or business dealings.
- 1.11. PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIP is an ongoing interaction between two people that observes a set of established boundaries or limits that is deemed appropriate under governing ethical and statutory standards.

## 2. Principles

- 2.1. Professional boundaries are integral to the practitioner-patient relationship. They promote quality care for patients and protect both parties.
- 2.2. The patient must feel that they are listened to and understood.
- 2.3. Boundary violations do not always occur at a single point in time. They can be the cumulative outcome of boundary crossings over a period of time.
- 2.4. Professional boundaries may also include interactions with those close to the patient.
- 2.5. The effective maintenance of boundaries between the dentist and patient is a continuous process and is the responsibility of the dentist to maintain and monitor.

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<sup>1</sup> This Policy Statement is linked to the ADA Code of Ethics and other Policy Statements: 5.14 *Dentistry and the Legal System*, 5.18 *Dentistry, Privacy and Confidentiality* & 6.13 *Partnering for Better Health – Dentists and Patients*.

2.6. Boundary violations may include:

- Using a professional position to establish or pursue a sexual, exploitative, unrelated business or otherwise inappropriate relationship with anybody under a practitioner's care.
- A relationship with a person who has previously been a patient.
- The expression of personal beliefs to patients in ways that exploit their vulnerability or that are likely to cause them distress.

2.7. A professional living and working in a regional or remote community will, out of necessity, have business and social relationships with patients and setting appropriate standards may be more difficult.

2.8. The consent of the patient is never a defence of a violated boundary.

### 3. Policy

3.1. Dentists must be aware of their responsibilities regarding professional boundaries and ensure that those boundaries are maintained.

#### **Policy Statement 6.5.2**

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