

Policy Statement 6.5 – Professional Boundaries

Position Summary

Professional boundaries are integral to good dental practitioner-patient relationship. Dental practitioners must be aware of their responsibilities regarding professional boundaries and ensure that professional relationships with their patients are maintained at all times.

1. Background

- 1.1. A strong dental practitioner-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 dental practitioners and their patients involves a unique position of trust. The quality of this relationship is influenced by the level of trust between them.
- 1.3. There can be a power imbalance between the dental practitioner and patient due to the dental practitioner's position of authority and the patient's vulnerability. This can occur as a result of many factors including an unequal knowledge base and a possible need to quickly establish a level of mutual trust.
- 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 dental practitioners. The Code of Ethics of the Australian Dental Association (ADA) also describes what contributes to this aspect of professional behaviour.
- 1.6. 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; or
 - the expression of personal beliefs to patients in ways that exploit their vulnerability or that are likely to cause them distress.
- 1.7. Boundary violations do not always occur at a single point in time but may result from an accumulation of boundaries crossings over a period of time.
- 1.8. The effective maintenance of boundaries between the dental practitioner and patient is a continuous process and is the responsibility of the dental practitioner to maintain and monitor.
- 1.9. 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.
- 1.10. States and territories are responsible for child protection legislation.

Definitions

- 1.11. The BOARD is the Dental Board of Australia.
- 1.12. BOUNDARY CROSSING occurs when a dental practitioner 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.
- 1.13. BOUNDARY VIOLATION occurs when the nature of the therapeutic relationship moves from a

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.

professional relationship to a damaging personal interaction or behaviour, including sexual and non-sexual misconduct.

1.14. PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARY is the implicit or explicit demarcation separating the professional relationship with a patient or persons close to the patient from other personal or business dealings.

1.15. PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIP is an ongoing interaction between two people that observes a set of established boundaries or limits that are deemed appropriate under governing ethical and statutory standards.

2. Position

2.1. Dental practitioners must be aware of their responsibilities regarding professional boundaries and ensure that those boundaries are maintained.

2.2. The consent of the patient should not be a defence of a violated boundary.

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