Teaching About Dealing With Boundary Violations

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What Are Boundaries?

- Limits of the relationship
  - Physical
  - Emotional
- Mutually understood
  - Unspoken
- Important where power differential exists
Purposes of Boundaries

• Define level of intimacy
  – Prevent inappropriate intimacy
  – Allow for connectedness

• Protect patient
  – Often ill and therefore vulnerable

• Protect Physician
  – Often have psychological vulnerabilities
Factors Affecting Boundaries

• Family-of-origin issues
  – Dysfunctional families with too rigid or too diffuse boundaries
  – Birth order and family role expectations
• Cultural and psychological aspects
  – Physician and patient
• Physician’s practice
  – Activity of practice and amount of time allowed
• Development of trust in relationship
  – Boundaries change as trust develops
Boundary Violations By Physicians

- Intimacy
  - Sexual, social
- Time
  - Helping patients shop for food on weekends
- Money
  - Providing cash for pharmaceutical co-payments
Patient Boundary Violations

• Usually a manifestation of psychosocial problems
  – Borderline personality
  – Others in times of stress
• Disruptive to the patient-physician relationship
• Very upsetting for the health practitioner
Types of Patient Boundary Violations

- Use of first name
- Personal questions
- Displays of affection by the patient
- Attempts to socialize with the physician
- Large or expensive gift giving
- Verbal abuse/sexually explicit language
- Physical abuse
- Attempts at sexual contact

Percent of Respondents Encountering Transgressions

- Sex Cont
- Physical
- Sex Lang
- Verb Abs
- Gifts
- Socialize
- Affection
- Questions
- 1st name

% Encountering
% Most Imp
How Most Important Incident Affected Pt-MD Relationship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How Affected</th>
<th># of Respondents (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very Negatively</td>
<td>37 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negatively</td>
<td>93 (28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not At All</td>
<td>122 (37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positively</td>
<td>24 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Positively</td>
<td>3 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Answer</td>
<td>51 (15)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Male & Female Physicians
Encountering Transgressions

Sex Cont  Physical  Sex Lang  Verb Abs  Gifts  Socialize  Affection  Questions  1st Name

Male  Female
How To Prevent Patient Boundary Violations

• Establish clear and mutually understood boundaries
• Physician self-awareness
  – Own needs
  – Own family-of-origin issues
How To Deal With Boundary Transgressions

• Communicate Clear Expectations
  – Nature of the relationship

• Set Limits

• Protect Yourself
  – Nurse presence for sexually oriented patients
  – Leave door open, security for violent patients

• Explore Patients’ Psychological Needs
  – Motivation for boundary transgression
  – Patient’s feelings

• Empathy
When Empathy Doesn’t Work

• Reiterate rules in the practice
• Be clear as to what you can offer the patient
• Tell the patient you want to continue to work with them to find a solution to their problem
When to Discharge a Patient From Your Practice

• Should make every attempt first to resolve the problem
  – Fiduciary nature of the patient-physician relationship

• Reason for discharge should be ethical and justifiable
  – Don’t discharge for minor issues
  – Only when the patient-physician relationship is no longer therapeutic for the patient
References

