
HEALTH CARE NEVER INVOLVES SEXUAL ACTIVITY

Legitimate health care *never* involves sexual activity between the practitioner and patient. Health care providers who initiate, encourage or permit sexual contact with their patients are exploiting them. Of course, sexual contact means engaging in sexual intercourse, with or without the patient's consent, or entering into a continuing sexual affair, but it also means any physical contact, such as fondling or touching in ways not properly part of professional examinations or treatment.

Health care professionals are trusted and respected, and it is common for patients to admire and feel attracted to them. A professional who accepts or encourages these normal feelings in a sexual way — or convinces or allows the patient to believe that sexual activity is a part of therapy — is abusing this trusting relationship.

Virginia's Department of Health Professions, through its 13 regulatory boards, licenses many types of health care professionals, including medical doctors, dentists, nurses, psychologists and others. For breaking laws or regulations, they can lose their licenses to practice or be disciplined by the boards in other ways.

Any sexual relationship between a health care provider and a patient of either sex is **unprofessional conduct** for which the licensed practitioner can be disciplined by one of the boards.

YOU MAY FEEL CONFUSED

If you are a victim of sexual abuse or exploitation by a health care provider, you probably will feel very confused. You may feel:

- Guilty and responsible — even though it's the practitioner's responsibility to keep sexual behavior out of treatment.

- Mixed feelings about the practitioner — anger, love, protective, betrayed.

- Isolated — as though no one else has had this problem.

- Distrustful of others or your own feelings.

- Fear that no one will believe you, understand what happened, or that others will find out.

- Depressed, obsessive or suicidal.

- Confused about dependency, control and power.

Remember: It does not matter if you started or wanted the sexual involvement. It also doesn't matter how long the sexual involvement has been going on. Health care professionals should never take advantage of patients who may have feelings for them that go beyond the professional relationship.

WARNING SIGNS

In some sexual abuse and misconduct cases, other inappropriate behavior frequently comes first. While it may be subtle or confusing, if it feels uncomfortable to you, then you have enough reason to be concerned. Some clues or warning signs are:

- Sitting too close, caressing.

- Inviting you to lunch, dinner or other social activities.

- Changing normal office activities, such as late appointments when no one else is present or appointments away from the office.

- Confiding in you about the practitioner's personal problems.

- Giving or receiving significant gifts or favors.

- Providing or using alcohol during treatment sessions.

- Hiring you to work for the practitioner.

EXAMPLES

Sexual abuse and exploitation can take many forms in a health care setting. Recent examples of cases involving both female and male victims that have been reported to the Virginia Department of Health Professions include:

- ☞ A psychologist who failed to deal appropriately with patients' expressions of sexual attraction by entering into sexual relationships with the patients.
- ☞ A medical doctor who molested patients and exposed himself during physical examinations.
- ☞ A dentist who committed sodomy on a patient and fondled others while they were under anesthesia.
- ☞ An optometrist who fondled teenage girls during eye examinations.
- ☞ A physician who refused to release a patient's records until the patient engaged in a sex act.
- ☞ A physician who established a sexual affair with an underage patient.
- ☞ A psychiatrist who gave alcohol, drugs, housing and other favors to young patients in exchange for sex.
- ☞ A nurse practitioner who established a sexual relationship with an emotionally fragile patient.
- ☞ A social worker who had sexual intercourse with a mentally disturbed client.

YOUR RIGHTS

As a patient of a licensed health care professional, you have the right to:

- Receive respectful treatment that will be beneficial to you.
- Ask questions about your treatment.
- Refuse a particular type of treatment or end treatment without harassment.
- A safe environment, free from sexual, physical and emotional compromise or abuse.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

If you feel you have been abused or exploited by a licensed health care provider, you can call or write to the **Virginia Department of Health Professions**.

Va. Dept. of Health Professions
6606 West Broad St., 4th floor
Richmond, VA 23230-1717

Telephone toll-free 1-800-533-1660
Monday-Friday, 8:15 a.m.-6:00 p.m.

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Sexual Exploitation in Health Care

Warning Signs

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Virginia
Department of Health Professions

