

## STANDARD OF PRACTICE S-014

Patient Relations Committee  
Approved by Council: February 8, 2005  
Re-affirmed by Council: February 19, 2009  
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February 14, 2012, September 20, 2013,  
September 16, 2017

## Prohibition of a Sexual Relationship with a Patient

*Note to readers: In the event of any inconsistency between this document and the legislation that affects chiropractic practice, the legislation governs.*

### INTENT

To inform members that a sexual relationship with a patient is strictly forbidden by law.

### DESCRIPTION OF STANDARD

Under no circumstances should a member have a sexual relationship with a current patient.

Sexualizing a professional relationship is against the law. In Ontario, the *Regulated Health Professions Act, 1991 (RHPA)* prohibits sexual involvement of health care professionals with patients. The *RHPA* defines sexual abuse as sexual intercourse or other forms of physical sexual relations, touching of a sexual nature, or behaviour or remarks of a sexual nature, between a member and a patient. Because of the broad definition of sexual abuse outlined in the *RHPA*, it is prohibited for a member to have a sexual relationship with a patient. Even the most casual dating relationship may lead to forms of affectionate behaviour that would fall under this definition and could leave the member open to a possible complaint to CCO.

- A sexual relationship with a patient is prohibited. Under the *RHPA*, the following types of sexual abuse will result in the revocation of a member's licence:
  - o sexual intercourse
  - o genital to genital, genital to anal, oral to genital, or oral to anal contact
  - o masturbation of the member by, or in the presence of, the patient
  - o masturbation of the patient by the member
  - o encouragement of the patient by the member to masturbate in the presence of the member.
  - o touching of a sexual nature of the patient's genitals, anus, breasts or buttocks; and
  - o other conduct of a sexual nature prescribed in regulations made pursuant to clause 43 (1) (u) of the *Regulated Health Professions Act, 1991*

For the purposes of this section, "sexual nature does not include touching, behaviour or remarks of a clinical nature appropriate to the service provided."

- A concurrent sexual and doctor/patient relationship is strictly against the law, no matter which relationship was established first. This prohibition includes providing patient care to a spouse, partner or anyone with whom the member has a sexual relationship (see Incidental or Emergency Treatment).
- For the purposes of the sexual abuse provisions, the *RHPA* defines "patient" as "patient", without restricting the ordinary meaning of the term, includes,
  - (a) an individual who was a member's patient within one year or such longer period of time as may be prescribed from the date on which the individual ceased to be the member's patient, and
  - (b) an individual who is determined to be a patient in accordance with the criteria in any regulations made under clause 43 (1) (o) of the *Regulated Health Professions Act, 1991*; ("patient")

Therefore, a member shall not commence a sexual relationship with an individual who is a patient or commit an act of sexual abuse, as defined in the *RHPA*, until at least one year from the date on which the individual ceased to be the member's patient.

- There is a history of complaints against members who have had sexual relationships with their patients/former patients. Complaints have been made by patients, significant others (including spouses of both members and patients) and former significant others. Therefore, a member shall ensure that there is a termination of the doctor/patient relationship before commencing a sexual relationship with a former patient. In such circumstances, the member shall:
  - o terminate the care of the patient;
  - o provide a referral to another chiropractor;
  - o document these actions in the patient health record;
  - o give a copy of such correspondence to the patient; and
  - o maintain a second copy in the file.

2

At the patient's request, the member shall transfer the record of personal health information to the new attending chiropractor.

- A member is reminded that he/she has an ethical obligation not to exploit the trust, knowledge and dependence that develops during the doctor/patient relationship. Before determining the appropriateness of a sexual relationship with a former patient, a member must think and act cautiously. A panel of the Inquiries, Complaints and Reports Committee, Discipline Committee or Fitness to Practise Committee will consider a number of factors in determining the appropriateness of a sexual relationship with a former patient, including but not limited to:
  - the nature, length and intensity of the former doctor/patient relationship;
  - the nature of the patient's clinical problem;
  - the type of care provided by the member;
  - the length of time following the termination of the doctor/patient relationship before the commencement of a sexual relationship; and
  - the vulnerability of the patient during and following the doctor/patient relationship and the patient's understanding of the dynamics and boundaries of the doctor/patient relationship.

It may never be appropriate for a member to have a sexual relationship with a former patient or for a member to provide patient care to someone with whom he/she previously had a sexual relationship in certain circumstances (for example, if there is a continued power imbalance between the member and the former patient, or the former patient is physically or emotionally vulnerable).<sup>1</sup>

- A member is reminded that he/she is a primary health care provider who is authorized to use the "doctor" title, perform certain controlled act under the *RHPA*, and provides "hands on" therapies and treatments. As such, the member should recognize that a power imbalance exists between the member and patients and patients are often in a physically and/or emotionally vulnerable position.

If a patient suggests or attempts to develop a sexual relationship, a member shall:

- inform the patient of the legal restrictions and prohibitions and communicate proper boundaries for the doctor/patient relationship;
- refer the patient to another chiropractor if the above actions do not resolve the situation; and
- document actions in the record of personal health information.

### **Evidence of a Doctor/Patient Relationship**

Case law, including *Leering v. College of Chiropractors of Ontario*<sup>2</sup>, has identified factors that would indicate the existence of a doctor/patient relationship. A panel of the Inquiries, Complaints and Reports Committee, Discipline Committee or Fitness to Practise Committee will consider various factors central to the doctor/patient relationship in determining whether a doctor/patient relationship exists.

Evidence of a doctor/patient relationship includes, but is not limited to:

- record of Personal Health Information that includes but is not limited to:
  - patient history
  - physical examination
  - diagnosis
  - plan of management
  - prognosis
  - diagnostic imaging reports
  - written record of treatment
  - informed consent to treatment
  - billing information
- commencement of billings, including billing to third parties, such as insurance companies
- financial records
- letters of consultation to and from other health professionals
- written communications or statements referring to an individual as a patient
- formal letter of discharge.

### **Evidence of the Termination of a Doctor/Patient Relationship**

Factors that would indicate the termination of a doctor/patient relationship include, but are not limited to:

4

- a referral letter to another chiropractor; or
- evidence the patient is receiving chiropractic care from another chiropractor

### Incidental or Emergency Treatment

In the case of *Leering v. College of Chiropractors of Ontario*, the Ontario Court of Appeal made several statements indicating that providing incidental or emergency treatment during the course of a spousal relationship may not result in a finding that the spouse was a patient within the meaning of the *RHPA*.

Incidental care was defined as subordinate to something of greater importance, minor in nature, casual or arising in fortuitous conjunction with a spousal relationship. The issue to be determined is whether a treatment is incidental to the spousal relationship and does not constitute the spouse as a patient, or whether the spouse receiving treatment is a patient under the *RHPA*. Examples of incidental care given by the Ontario Court of Appeal are a doctor providing spot emergency care to a spouse following an accident or a chiropractor providing a manipulation to a spouse who suffers a muscle spasm to provide immediate relief.

A panel of the Inquiries, Complaints and Reports Committee, Discipline Committee or Fitness to Practise Committee will determine if a concurrent doctor/patient relationship and sexual relationship occurred, as follows:

- Review the factors of incidental or emergency treatment, as determined by the Ontario Court of Appeal; and
- Apply these factors to the specific facts of a complaint or hearing.

If a finding of a concurrent doctor/patient relationship and sexual relationship is made, the sexual abuse provisions of the *RHPA* will apply.

A member who provides incidental or emergency treatment to someone with whom he/she is engaging in a sexual relationship and decides that the person would benefit from receiving additional chiropractic care must refer that person to another chiropractor and/or health care professional. In addition, the member should document this referral.

### **Final Words**

- A sexual relationship with a patient is strictly forbidden by law.
- Information regarding allegations of sexual abuse comes to the attention of CCO through the Inquiries Complaints and Reports Committee, and/or mandatory reporting by a member or another health professional.
- The penalties for a finding of professional misconduct relating to sexual abuse of a patient, which are found in section 51(2) of the Code, include:
  - o revocation of a member's licence for five years;
  - o stringent conditions on a member's licence before applying for reinstatement;
  - o results of the discipline proceedings will remain on the public register indefinitely; and
  - o financial obligations, such as paying for therapy and/or counselling for the victims and reimbursing CCO for legal and investigative costs.

## **LEGISLATIVE CONTEXT**

**Health Professions Procedural Code, *Schedule 2 to the Regulated Health Professions Act, 1991***

### **Sexual Abuse of a patient**

Section 1(3): In this Code, "sexual abuse" of a patient by a member means,  
(a) sexual intercourse or other forms of physical relations between the member and the patient,  
(b) touching, of a sexual nature, of the patient by the member, or  
(c) behaviour or remarks of a sexual nature by the member towards the patient.

### **Exception**

6

Section 1(4): For the purposes of subsection (3), "sexual nature does not include touching, behaviour or remarks of a clinical nature appropriate to the service provided."

### **Definition of Patient**

Section 1(6): For the purposes of subsections (3) and (5), "patient", without restricting the ordinary meaning of the term, includes,

- (a) an individual who was a member's patient within one year or such longer period of time as may be prescribed from the date on which the individual ceased to be the member's patient, and
- (b) an individual who is determined to be a patient in accordance with the criteria in any regulations made under clause 43 (1) (o) of the Regulated Health Professions Act, 1991; ("patient")

### **Statement of purpose, sexual abuse provisions**

1.1 The purpose of the provisions of this Code with respect to sexual abuse of patients by members is to encourage the reporting of such abuse, to provide funding for therapy and counselling for patients who have been sexually abused by members and, ultimately, to eradicate the sexual abuse of patients by members.

### **Orders relating to sexual abuse**

Section 51(5): If a panel finds a member has committed an act of professional misconduct by sexually abusing a patient, the panel shall do the following in addition to anything else the panel may do under subsection (2):

1. Reprimand the member.
2. Revoke the member's certificate of registration if the sexual abuse consisted of, or included, any of the following,
  - i. Sexual intercourse
  - ii. Genital to genital, genital to anal, oral to genital, or oral to anal contact,
  - iii. Masturbation of the member by, or in the presence of, the patient,
  - iv. Masturbation of the patient by the member,
  - v. Encouragement of the patient by the member to masturbate in the presence of the member.
  - vi. touching of a sexual nature of the patient's genitals, anus, breasts or buttocks; and
  - vii. other conduct of a sexual nature prescribed in regulations made pursuant to clause 43 (1) (u) of the *Regulated Health Professions Act, 1991*

For the purposes of this section, "sexual nature does not include touching, behaviour or remarks of a clinical nature appropriate to the service provided."

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**Statement re: impact of sexual abuse**

Section 51(6): Before making an order under subsection (5), the panel shall consider any written statement that has been filed, and any oral statement that has been made to the panel, describing the impact of the sexual abuse on the patient.

**Same**

Section 51(7): The statement may be made by the patient or by his or her representative.

**Notice to member**

Section 51(8): The panel shall not consider the statement unless a finding of professional misconduct has been made.

Section 51(9): When a written statement is filed, the panel shall, as soon as possible, have copies of it provided to the member, to his or her counsel and the College.

**Application for Reinstatement**

Section 72(1): A person whose certificate of registration has been revoked or suspended as a result of disciplinary or incapacity proceedings may apply in writing to the Registrar to have a new certificate issued or the suspension removed.

Section 72 (3): An application under subsection (1), in relation to a revocation for sexual abuse of a patient, shall not be made earlier than,

- (a) five years after the date on which the certificate of registration was revoked; or
- (b) six months after a decision has been made in a previous application under subsection (1).

<sup>1</sup> *Mussani v. College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario*, 2003 CanLII 45308 (ON SCDC), *R.A.R. v. College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario*, 2006 CanLII 37118 (ON CA)

<sup>2</sup> *Leering v. College of Chiropractors of Ontario*, [2010] O.J. No. 406, 2010 ONCA 87