



CLEAR SEXUAL BOUNDARIES IN THE PATIENT – PHYSIOTHERAPIST RELATIONSHIP

A guide for patients

Introduction

The patient-physiotherapist relationship is one of confidence and trust. It can involve the sharing of private information and physical contact so clearly understood boundaries are important.

Physiotherapy New Zealand considers that a sexual relationship between a current patient and a physiotherapist is never acceptable, breaks professional boundaries and is unethical. There are good reasons for sexual boundaries between physiotherapists and their patient:

- **Safety** – a breach in sexual boundaries in the patient-physiotherapist relationship has been shown to be harmful, physically and emotionally to the patient.
- **Trust** – a breach of boundaries is a breach of trust
- **Good health care** – your physiotherapist's judgment about your care and treatment may be confused by emotions and feelings

Why professional boundaries are important

The patient-physiotherapist relationship is not equal. Your physiotherapist may:

- As part of the assessment process ask for, (and keep) private and personal information about you
- Suggest treatment options
- Ask you to remove some of your clothing to better examine you
- Physically examine you

Clear and open communication is an essential component of a successful patient-physiotherapist relationship.

What should you expect during every physiotherapy session

- **Undressing facilities** - if you need to undress there should be a place to undress out of view of anyone. You should be given something to wear or appropriate draping.
- **Support person/Chaperone** - you (or the physiotherapist) can request that another person is present – please refer to PNZ Guidelines for a third person being present during assessment and treatment
- **Ongoing consent** - to be asked for your consent to the various tests the physiotherapist is going to carry out, including those that involve touch, and an explanation of why they are required.

Patients' responsibilities

Your physiotherapist is responsible for keeping the patient – physiotherapist boundaries. You can help by telling them if you feel uncomfortable with anything they are doing or do not understand their explanations. You can ask them to stop at any time without it prejudicing the provision of care in the future.

Physiotherapists' responsibilities

When a physiotherapist is registered in New Zealand he or she must abide by the Aotearoa New Zealand Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct. These clearly state: Sexual contact of any kind with patients/clients is unacceptable (2.9)

What constitutes a breach of professional boundaries?

Professional boundaries can be breached in different ways. Sexual harassment is defined as any verbal or physical behavior of a sexual nature, including misuse of visual or written material, which is unwelcome and offensive to the receiver and which is either repeated or of such a significant nature that it has a detrimental effect on a person's employment or trust in their physiotherapist. Examples of actions which may be considered sexual harassment are:

- personally sexually offensive verbal comments
- jokes of a sexual nature
- repeated comments or teasing about someone's alleged sexual activities or private life
- persistent, unwelcome social invitations or telephone calls at work or home
- inappropriate text messages and/or use of social media
- inappropriate physical contact e.g. patting, pinching, touching
- sexual connection

Sexual harassment is prohibited by law (Human Rights Act 1993; Employment Relations Act 2000).

What do you do if you feel your physiotherapist has breached sexual/professional boundaries?

If you feel your physiotherapist has breached sexual/professional/ boundaries with you or someone else, it is best to discuss this with the staff of the Health and Disability Commissioner who deals with complaints about health professionals, or a patient advocate. Information on how you can access help is available from the Health and Disability Commissioner helpline 0800 112233 or the website www.hdc.org.nz

The commissioner's complaints process is specified by law