Sexual boundaries between physiotherapists and patients

The APA National Professional Standards Panel views with concern the findings of Cooper and Jenkins (2008) on professional sexual boundaries between physiotherapists and their patients.

In 2008, the Panel undertook a review of the APA Code of Conduct in consultation with a wide range of stakeholders including physiotherapists, Registration Boards, Health Service Commissioners, third party purchasers, Health Departments and – most importantly – consumer representatives. This consultation process made it abundantly clear that the APA needed to take a strong and clear stand on professional sexual boundaries for the benefit of physiotherapists and patients alike.

Accordingly, the APA Code of Conduct (2008) stipulates that APA members must respect the rights, needs, and dignity of all individuals. Two of the interpretations of this principle relate to professional sexual boundaries as follows:

- Members shall not engage in any sexual activity with a person who is a current client.
- Members shall not engage in any sexual activity with a person who is a former client where such activity would constitute exploitation of a professional relationship.

While Cooper and Jenkins (ibid) found that opinions on professional sexual boundaries differed where sporting teams and rural private practice were concerned, the APA takes the view that in almost every possible circumstance acceptable professional boundaries are immutable regardless of the setting in which the physiotherapy is provided. The APA argues that sexual relationships with patients are inappropriate because the power relations in the physiotherapist-patient relationship are inherently unequal and can give rise to exploitation of the patient. In addition, transgression of professional boundaries can impede the clinical judgement of the physiotherapist. Both these scenarios are profoundly counter to the principles in the APA Code of Conduct.

The National Professional Standards Panel notes that many Physiotherapists Registration Boards, including those in New South Wales, Tasmania, Queensland, Northern Territory, and Victoria, provide specific guidance material on professional sexual boundaries. Following the release of the Association’s new Code of Conduct, the National Professional Standards Panel intends to develop complementary documentation on sexual boundaries to provide more detailed guidance for members and members of the public.

Cooper and Jenkins (2008) argue that more information is needed about complaints processes. The Panel notes that such information is available on the APA website as well as on the websites of Physiotherapists Registration Boards. Any complaint involving an alleged transgression of professional boundaries should be referred to the relevant Physiotherapists Registration Board or to the police depending on the circumstances. The APA does not investigate such complaints in the first instance because the Association considers it preferable for such matters to be investigated independently by the relevant statutory authority. However, where such a complaint results in a criminal conviction or a ruling of unprofessional conduct against a member of the Association, the National Professional Standards Panel investigates the physiotherapist’s ongoing eligibility for APA membership.

Physiotherapists who are members of the APA are making a public commitment to professional accountability and to high standards of ethical and professional conduct including respect for professional boundaries. The Association has a responsibility to protect this valuable standing.

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References
