

# PRESS RELEASE



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## **NEW WARNING ON IMPROPER RELATIONSHIPS WITH PATIENTS.**

Doctors who get too close to patients risk being struck off warns MDDUS, as new figures show a near doubling in the number of allegations of improper relationships.

The UK-wide medical defence organisation is advising doctors that engaging in a sexual or improper emotional relationship may not only cause distress to the patient, but also lead to serious professional difficulties and possible loss of livelihood.

The advice comes after the General Medical Council (GMC) released figures that showed the number of doctors erased from the register following fitness to practise hearings due to improper relationships rose to 8 in 2009. In 2008 the figure was only 5.

A total of 15 such allegations were made in 2009, up from 8 in 2008. This made improper relationships with patients the most common allegation leading to doctors being struck off during 2009 – overtaking purely clinical issues - demonstrating how seriously the GMC views this issue.

Dr Barry Parker, medical adviser at MDDUS says: "It is perhaps not surprising that emotional attachments may develop in the context of a doctor patient relationship. Patients look to their doctors for support and help, sometimes during very difficult times in their lives - and this may encourage emotional reactions on both sides.

"However, it is the doctor's professional duty to deal appropriately with these emotions and make sure that no improper relationship develops as a consequence of them."

The GMC advises that in order to maintain professional boundaries and the trust of the public, doctors must not establish or pursue a sexual or improper emotional relationship with a patient. They must also avoid using their contact with the patient to establish or pursue a relationship with someone close to them.

Even in the case of a former patient, the regulatory body advises caution, as a relationship may still be regarded as inappropriate, especially if the patient could be considered vulnerable or immature at the time they were under the doctor's care or subsequently.

MDDUS is issuing advice to doctors on how to avoid a problem. Firstly, they must remain vigilant when seeing patients and take note of any warning signs that an inappropriate attachment is developing.

Dr. Parker adds: "This could present as over familiarity, frequent gifts or inappropriate verbal comments, letters or invitations received from the patient. The signs may be less direct, and come from concerns expressed by others about the patient making inappropriate comments regarding the relationship.

"Once aware of these signs, doctors must act sensitively but decisively to make it clear to the patient that this behaviour is not appropriate and to re-establish agreed boundaries."

MDDUS stresses that on occasions it may be necessary to enlist the help of another doctor or health care professional when discussing this with the patient - and if the behaviour is extreme or persists, it may be necessary to end contact with the patient altogether.

Intimate physical examinations may be particularly open to misunderstanding in the context of an inappropriate emotional attachment. Doctors are advised by the GMC to offer all patients the security of having an impartial observer or chaperone present during an intimate examination.

Dr. Parker concludes: "Doctors must also be aware of their own emotions, and follow the GMC guidance provided to them.

"They must remember that, should they make the mistake of disregarding this guidance, they may not only cause distress to the patient, but they may also risk their registration and consequently their livelihood."

## **Ends**

For further information contact Colin Calder on 0141 616 2677 or 07850 510881.

## **Note to editors**

MDDUS (Medical and Dental Defence Union of Scotland) is a medical defence organisation providing access to professional indemnity and expert medico-legal advice for doctors, dentists and other healthcare professionals throughout the UK.

For further information on MDDUS go to [www.mddus.com](http://www.mddus.com).