

# Practice Guideline for Professional Boundaries in Therapeutic Relationships

## Introduction

The Practice Guideline for Professional Boundaries in Therapeutic Relationships is intended to provide insight to registrants of the College of Pharmacists of Manitoba (College), and the public, of the expectations on a registrant, to maintain the boundaries of therapeutic relationships with patients. This guideline should be read in conjunction with The Code of Ethics. This professional guideline is developed under the principles of *The Pharmaceutical Act* and in the spirit of *The Regulated Health Professions Act*.

## Definitions

**Therapeutic relationship:** a planned, goal-directed covenant between a pharmacist and a patient for the purpose of achieving positive health-related outcomes. The therapeutic relationship between a pharmacist and a patient is one with fiduciary responsibility. This relationship is held to a high standard, as outlined by The Code of Ethics.

**Dual relationship:** a relationship that is both professional and social in nature. A pharmacist is expected to avoid a dual relationship regardless of a patient's willingness to initiate, or consent to, a relationship that is anything other than therapeutic in nature.

**Registrant:** anyone included in a register of the College including a pharmacist, pharmacy intern and pharmacy student.

A pharmacy owner may not be a pharmacist and therefore not all owners are involved in a therapeutic relationship with a patient. However, all owners are expected to abide by this guideline. There is an inherent power imbalance within the relationship between a patient and the pharmacy owner, regardless of whether or not the owner is a regulated healthcare professional.

**Boundary:** the point at which a relationship changes from professional and therapeutic to non-professional and personal.

## Tenets of a Therapeutic Relationship:

### **Respect**

A registrant must build a relationship with a patient based on respect. Respect acknowledges the patient's autonomy, confidentiality, and dignity. The registrant must uphold the interests of the patient, above all other factors, as the focus of the therapeutic relationship. A registrant's self-interest should not come before the therapeutic need of the patient.

### **Trust**

Trust creates an environment of safety established through the provision of healthcare services demonstrating confidentiality and transparency. Patients expect pharmacists to have the requisite knowledge to practice with professional competence. Pharmacists are expected to act in the best interest of the patient with honesty and integrity.

### **Empathy**

Pharmacists should express empathy when addressing a patient's healthcare challenges. Demonstrating understanding of the patient's feelings and concerns is the foundation of empathy. Maintaining a level of professional intimacy is secured by showing compassion that maintains the boundary of emotional distance.

### **Power**

The pharmacist has specialized intimate knowledge of the patient and their health concerns. The patient relies on the pharmacist for assistance in medication management, disease information and navigation of the healthcare system. The pharmacist should not seek information which is not necessary in making informed recommendations or educating the patient.

A power-imbalance exists within a therapeutic relationship. Registrants should be particularly sensitive to a vulnerable patient such as a minor, a person with addiction concerns, or an individual with diminished capacity, that may be at risk for additional harm.

A therapeutic relationship balances respect, trust, empathy, and the inherent power imbalance to support the patient in their healthcare needs. If any one of these tenants are not secure, there is risk for the crossing of a therapeutic boundary that could result in misconduct.

## Setting the Boundaries of Therapeutic Relationships

Boundaries are crucial in the maintenance of an appropriate therapeutic relationship. The registrant is responsible for setting and maintaining boundaries. Forming a relationship with a patient outside a professional setting potentially exposes the registrant to serious regulatory consequences.

## Manage the Boundaries

The registrant must establish, maintain and communicate the boundaries of the therapeutic relationship with the patient. The pharmacist is the healthcare professional, having a duty to protect the well-being of the patient.

Suggestions for managing the boundary of the therapeutic relationship are:

- respect the patient's privacy and autonomy
- show sensitivity and respect for the patient's privacy and comfort at all times
- avoid dual (therapeutic and social) relationships and/or social interactions with patients
- outside of the therapeutic necessity, avoid physical contact with a patient
  - obtain informed consent prior to initiating the physical contact
  - if physical contact is therapeutically necessary, explain the nature, purpose and likely duration of the physical contact
- refrain from behaviour or remarks that may be interpreted as sexual or inappropriate by the patient, including:
  - remarks about a patient's body or clothing
  - criticism or comment regarding a patient's sexual preference
  - asking for details of sexual history or behaviour unless related to the purpose of the consultation
- personal and/or sexual relationships between a pharmacist and a patient's caregiver may result in a breach of trust and power imbalance
- do not talk to patients about your personal matters
- be pro-active and cognizant of situations that may involve gift giving due to cultural values or traditions
- control interactions that may compromise or erode therapeutic boundaries and implement self-reflection practices to avoid such situations in the future
- identify and proactively plan for situations that require enhanced vigilance, such as administering a vaccine in a private counselling room

## Guard the Boundary

When a possible erosion or breach of the boundary of the therapeutic relationship has been identified, the pharmacist should take action to guard against such an erosion from occurring again. The following are recommended actions when such an incident has been identified:

1. **Share:** inform your pharmacy manager of the incident or conversation. If you are the pharmacy manager, discuss the incident with your pharmacy staff so that it is known to the pharmacy team
2. **Re-establish:** it is important to re-establish the boundaries of the therapeutic relationship with the patient as soon as possible. A discussion with the patient is appropriate and should include the pharmacy manager. If you are the pharmacy manager, another member of the pharmacy team should be present for the discussion.
3. **Identify:** consider strategies that could have been used to control the incident for a more favorable outcome in the future

4. **Educate:** ensure that the pharmacy team is educated and empowered to use the identified strategies to avoid a similar situation
5. **Document:** document the incident and outcomes in the patient's file and amend the pharmacy's policy and procedure manual with any applicable changes

### Examples of a Boundary Breach

The following behaviors are unacceptable in a therapeutic relationship:

- abuse of a patient (physical, emotional, verbal, sexual or financial)
- commencing a social/personal/sexual relationship with a patient (including social networking sites)
- neglect
- harassment
- acting as a representative for a patient under powers of attorney or representation agreements
- using personal health information obtained while in a therapeutic relationship, to pursue a personal relationship with a patient
- using information from a therapeutic relationship for personal advantage

## Termination of a Patient Relationship

A pharmacist cannot enter into a personal relationship with an existing patient. It is unethical for a registrant to terminate a therapeutic relationship in order to engage in a personal relationship with a patient. Should a patient seek to terminate the therapeutic relationship with the pharmacist, the patient's healthcare needs must be met elsewhere.

Sexual contact with a former patient may be considered professional misconduct even though it may not be established as sexual abuse. A sexual or romantic relationship is inappropriate in cases where the therapeutic relationship has created a vulnerability or dependency on the part of the patient that affects the patient's ability to act freely.

## Duty to Report

Please be reminded of a pharmacist's duty to report, as outlined in Section 97 of *The Pharmaceutical Act* and Statement VIII of the *Code of Ethics*. Pharmacists are required to notify the College if they believe another pharmacist presents a risk to patient safety, this includes having a nonprofessional relationship with a patient. A pharmacist who discloses information to the College is exempt from liability, unless the disclosure was made maliciously.

### References:

Alberta College of Pharmacists, 2019. Standards of Practice - Sexual Abuse and Misconduct.  
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