



UNDERSTANDING BOUNDARY VIOLATIONS AND SEXUAL ABUSE/SEXUAL MISCONDUCT

The role of the College of Registered Dental Hygienists of Alberta (CRDHA) is to ensure dental hygienists have the knowledge, skills, attitude and judgment to provide safe and competent oral health services to the public. Part of this responsibility, as mandated by the *Health Professions Act (HPA)*, is that the College has a program in place to develop and implement measures for preventing and dealing with the sexual abuse of or sexual misconduct towards clients¹. This program is taken very seriously by the College.

Definition of Sexual Abuse and Sexual Misconduct

According to Section 1(1)(nn.1) of the *HPA*, **sexual abuse** is defined as:

The threatened, attempted or actual conduct of a regulated member towards a patient that is of a sexual nature and includes any of the following conduct:

- (a) sexual intercourse between a regulated member and a patient of that regulated member;
- (b) genital to genital, genital to anal, oral to genital, or oral to anal contact between a regulated member and a patient of that regulated member;
- (c) masturbation of a regulated member by, or in the presence of, a patient of that regulated member;
- (d) masturbation of a regulated member's patient by that regulated member;
- (e) encouraging a regulated member's patient to masturbate in the presence of that regulated member;
- (f) touching of a sexual nature of a patient's genitals, anus, breasts or buttocks by a regulated member.

Section 1(1)(nn.2) of the *HPA* defines **sexual misconduct** as follows:

Any incident or repeated incidents of objectionable or unwelcome conduct, behaviour or remarks of a sexual nature by a regulated member towards a patient that the regulated member knows or ought reasonably to know will or would cause offence or humiliation to the patient or adversely affect the patient's health and well-being but does not include sexual abuse.

Sexual nature does not include any conduct, behaviour or remarks that are appropriate to the service provided.

What constitutes a boundary violation?

Clients trust their dental hygienist because of their knowledge and skills. The dental hygienist/client relationship is based on the principles of trust, respect, and caring. It is generally recognized that a power imbalance exists between any health professional and a client. The dental hygienist is responsible for maintaining the professional boundaries in the relationship at all times.

Sexual abuse, sexual misconduct, or a new romantic relationship between a dental hygienist and a client are boundary violations. Numerous other actions may cross professional boundaries. For instance, if your dental hygienist shares

secrets with you, tries to involve you in a business deal, or asks to see you outside the clinic setting, roles can be blurred. When that happens, the dental hygienist is stepping out of their professional role and is not acting in your best interests.

Sometimes clients themselves cross the line by treating the dental hygienist more like a friend, for example, or by trying to instigate a romantic relationship. However, it is the responsibility of the dental hygienist to maintain professional boundaries. As the person who is in a position of authority and who has professional obligations, the dental hygienist is the one who must maintain ethics and clarify the roles and goals in the relationship.

What should you do if you feel uncomfortable or feel that a boundary has been crossed during your dental hygiene visit?

If you ever feel uneasy or uncomfortable about what happened during your dental hygiene visit or believe that your care is being compromised as a result, raise these concerns with your dental hygienist, their employer, or the CRDHA.

If you think you have been experienced sexual abuse or sexual misconduct, please contact the CRDHA office at 780-465-1756 (toll free 1-877-465-1756) or the CRDHA Complaints Director at complaints@crdha.ca.

Acknowledgements

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¹The *HPA* used the term “patient” as it relates to the person receiving treatment from a regulated health professional, while the College of Registered Dental Hygienists of Alberta uses the term “client”. Therefore, the terms “client” and “patient” become mutually interchangeable.