AHCS®
Academy for Healthcare Science

Working Within Boundaries

Version:	**1.0**
Date:	**16.11.26**
Doc Ref:	**#146**
Review date:	**November 2029**

Version number	Purpose/Change	Author	Date
1.0	**New guidance in response to PSA feedback and** sexual misconduct report issue	Lizanne Steenkamp/Jude Savage	**November 26**

Maintaining personal and professional boundaries

As a registered professional, there are two key aspects to consider in association with working within boundaries.

The first relates to your own conduct in maintaining appropriate personal and professional boundaries with patients, carers and colleagues. The second relates to other people's conduct and taking responsibility to be mindful of how others behave (and to be prepared to act if necessary) in the same contexts. Simply, working within boundaries means ensuring that your relationship always remains professional, this principle is expanded on, in the next section.

As with all our professional standards, this guidance applies to all our registrants to the extent it is relevant to the individual's practice. Maintaining personal and professional boundaries builds on the AHCS Good Scientific Practice to provide more detail on our expectations of healthcare science professionals in this area. The same principles of behaviour apply whether you are interacting in a face to face, telephone or online setting and this guidance should also be read alongside the AHCS Social Media Guidance for Registrants. This document has been produced with reference to HCPC's maintaining professional boundaries guidance.

Professional boundaries and Patients

The relationship you have with your patients is built on trust, and this is essential for you to be able to provide them with the care that they need. You establish and maintain that trust by treating your patients with dignity and respect and involving them in decisions about their care.

There is always a power imbalance between you and your patients. Patients are vulnerable when they need care. As the professional, you hold the knowledge and resources they need, which puts you in a position of power. It is important to consider the potential impact that the position of power and trust you hold as a healthcare scientist may have on individuals in social or personal settings. You must not abuse your position as a healthcare scientist to pursue personal, sexual, emotional or financial relationships with patients, carers or colleagues.

Crossing a professional boundary with a patient or their carer is a serious breach of that trust and an abuse of your position.

It is your responsibility to ensure that your relationship with patients and their carers remains professional. If the boundary is beginning to blur or has been crossed, you should end the professional relationship and refer the patient to another relevant health professional.

A boundary may be crossed by:

- Giving and receiving gifts
- Extending invitations to social events or making plans to meet socially
- Developing a friendship or personal relationship
- Borrowing or lending money
- Providing a patient with your personal contact information
- Connecting on social media

If a patient behaves in a sexual way towards you, and you feel safe to do so, you should tell them that their behaviour is unacceptable and ask them to stop. If the patient does not stop the behaviour, or you do not feel safe to challenge the patient or continue with the interaction, you should excuse yourself from the encounter and seek help. You should report the incident in line with workplace policies and seek support if you need it.

Professional boundaries and colleagues

Your colleagues include everyone that you work with and alongside. It includes students, learners and trainees, other professionals, support workers, clerical and administrative staff, and professional care providers. It includes those people that you work with and alongside and who are within or outside of your organisation.

Consensual and reciprocated personal relationships between colleagues are a private matter between individuals. However, it is important that professional boundaries are maintained, and the undertaking, and/or end of a relationship has no adverse impact on clinical practice or team environments.

It is your responsibility to maintain professional boundaries with your colleagues.

Work with colleagues

We all have a right to work in an environment that is safe, free of discrimination, bullying and harassment. Incivility and unprofessional or sexualised behaviours have a significant and harmful impact on individual colleagues and teams. These behaviours build unhealthy workplace cultures leading to poor patient outcomes. You must treat your colleagues in a professional manner showing them respect and consideration.

Certain working environments might increase the level of risk of unacceptable sexual behaviours occurring. These can include residential settings, nightshifts, conferences, gender imbalances in specialties, workplace cultures, and large differences in seniority or power levels between colleagues. The risk is also increased in environments where fear of reputational damage or organisational inconvenience is prioritised over holding perpetrators to account.

What is sexual misconduct and sexual harassment?

Sexual misconduct is an umbrella term, widely accepted as covering any unwanted or non-consensual conduct of a sexual nature. This encompasses both behaviour towards colleagues and patients and service-users. (PSA 2026)

Sexual harassment is defined under the Equality Act 2010 as unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature — verbal, non-verbal or physical - that creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment. (PSA 2026)

Sexual misconduct, harassment and behaviours of a sexual nature can be particularly harmful, causing serious psychological, emotional or physical harm, that can remain long after the abuse has happened. These behaviours can leave a person feeling offended, embarrassed, harmed, humiliated or intimidated.

Behaviours of a sexual nature

- Inappropriate comments relating to your appearance
- Unwelcome propositions and sexual advances
- Sexual or sexist comments, jokes, innuendo and banter
- A person talking or sharing information about their own sex life
- Sending, sharing or displaying sexually explicit pictures, posters or photos
- Sending sexually explicit emails, text messages or posts on social media
- Unwelcome touching, particularly of intimate areas of the body or in sexual way
- Suggestive gestures or remarks
- Making promises in return for sexual favours
- Intrusive questions about a person's private or sex life
- Physical contact or assault

These behaviours are sexual in nature if delivered in person, shared online or sent via email or text message. A person of any gender can display these behaviours or be the recipient of them. **Sexual misconduct is always unacceptable and always harmful.**

If you have a formal leadership or management role, you must take active steps to create an environment where people can talk about concerns safely. This includes concerns about unacceptable sexual behaviours. If you are aware of such concerns, you must act to:

- Ensure such behaviours are adequately addressed
- Ensure people are supported where necessary, and
- Ensure concerns are dealt with promptly, being escalated where necessary.

What is grooming?

Grooming is when a person builds a relationship so that they can manipulate, coerce or encourage a person to do things, or allow things to be done to them that they might not otherwise agree to.

It is possible for adults and children of any gender to be groomed, or prepared for abuse, particularly when we are vulnerable or feeling vulnerable. Grooming can happen in person or online.

Often the person doing the grooming is in a position of power or control, for example they may be a more senior colleague or be a professional with more knowledge and experience.

In some circumstances (for example in the case of grooming) the behaviour may not be experienced as unwanted or non-consensual at the time. Perpetrators may rely on a power asymmetry to exploit their victim, and victims/survivors may not recognise the behaviour as exploitative until a later date.

It is key to understand that actions and behaviours outside the workplace may also constitute sexual misconduct

Speaking up and raising concerns

As a registered healthcare science professional, you have responsibilities to challenge discrimination and unprofessional behaviours, and raise concerns when you witness a colleague bully, harass or intimidated a patient, carer or colleague.

Report concerns

You must raise concerns regarding colleagues if you witness bullying, harassment or intimidation of a patient, carer or another colleague. This should be done following the relevant procedures within your practice or organisation and maintaining the safety of all involved. Please also see AHCS Fitness to Practice policies, procedures and guidance for information on escalating concerns to us, following the reporting of issues at organisational level and AHCS whistleblowing guidance

We recognise that raising concerns about colleagues can be very challenging and provide additional information and resources to support you with raising concerns.

Support for you

If you have been or are being subjected to bullying, harassment or sexual misconduct, we encourage you to seek help and support.

References

[Maintaining professional boundaries | The HCPC]

[Report on improving sexual misconduct case handling in fitness to practise processes | PSA]

Useful Resources

[Sexual safety hub | The HCPC]

Research providing insights into sexual misconduct by health and care professionals:

[Sexual misconduct research | Professional Standards Authority]

[Sexual harassment and harassment at work: technical guidance | EHRC]

Organisations that can provide support (Reproduced from [Specialist help and support - Sexual harassment - Acas])

Women who've experienced sexual harassment at work can get free legal advice from:

- [Rights of Women] **– England and Wales**
- [Scottish Women's Rights Centre]

Help after sexual assault or rape

You can get help and information from:

- [Galop] **– LGBT+ sexual violence support**
- [Rape Crisis England and Wales]
- [Rape Crisis Scotland]
- [The Survivors Trust]
- [SurvivorsUK] **– for men and non-binary people affected by rape and sexual abuse**
- [Victim Support] **– in England and Wales**
- [Victim Support Scotland]

[Find out about other help after rape and sexual assault on the NHS website]

This is not an exhaustive list but are the organisations that are frequently listed to provide help and support