



## Dating a Patient? Refer First

By TDIC Risk Management Staff

There is considerable information about the ethical implications and risks of dentists dating a patient of record, but the fact remains that dentists encounter a variety of people in daily practice and may find themselves attracted to a patient. Conversely, a dentist discovers a patient is attracted to him or her.

So let's cut to the courtship.

If you are a single dentist who is interested in dating a patient, The Dentists Insurance Company strongly advises that you refer the patient to another dentist for dental care before beginning a personal relationship. If an attraction develops, consider ahead of time how this might become an awkward situation in the future.

"Romantic chemistry happens," said a TDIC analyst who fields calls for the Risk Management Advice Line. "But there are risks involved with dating a patient, especially if the relationship does not work out." Risks range from damage to your professional reputation to an imbalance in the doctor/patient relationship to retaliation if the romance fails.

For these and other reasons, TDIC recommends a written office policy against dating patients. "The policy should be applied universally," said analyst Taiba Solaiman. The doctor sets the example for the office." If a doctor dates a patient, it sends a message to the rest of the staff that it is acceptable behavior.

A dentist who has weighed the consequences and is serious about dating a patient should refer the patient to another dental provider. Consider informing staff about the decision. Communicating with staff improves accountability and encourages discussion about similar patient-dating situations among the team.

If a staff member is dating a patient, the best practice is the same: the patient must seek dental care from another office. This can prevent a number of potential problems. There could be concerns surrounding forgiving a balance or unauthorized credit placed on a patient's account. If the relationship does not work out, the patient may voice concerns about unauthorized access to his or her private health information.

The ethical considerations of personal relationships with patients are addressed in the ADA Principles of Ethics and Code of Professional Conduct, which states: "Dentists should avoid interpersonal relationships that could impair their professional

judgment or risk the possibility of exploiting the confidence placed in them by a patient." This section is under the Principle of Nonmaleficence ("do no harm").

Patients ideally trust and respect their dentist and reveal confidential information with the expectation that it will be used only in their best interest. This dynamic creates a delicate balance between dentists and patients that must not be exploited.

In addition to ethics, dentists must consider that if a relationship with a patient ends, an embittered ex-paramour could file a legal or disciplinary action for punitive reasons that is solely motivated by the possibility of financial reward.

Combining professional and personal relationships is never without complications. The potential for unforeseen and possibly career-impacting issues is increased when you choose to date patients in your practice. TDIC advises taking steps to minimize risk resulting from your role as a health care professional. A simple, "Thank you, no" can protect your practice and professional reputation.

**TDIC's Risk Management Advice Line can be reached at 800.733.0634.**

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