

How ReMed can help when boundaries are overstepped

Sexual advances: ReMed does not judge

As the case discussed here shows, inappropriate sexual behaviour in medical practices remains a taboo. ReMed, the support network for doctors, wants to encourage affected doctors to seek help without prejudging or denouncing them, so that they can overcome their harmful behaviour.

A young foreign female assistant doctor training to become a specialist in gynaecology married a Swiss colleague. She quickly obtained a position as assistant physician in the surgical department of a hospital and settled in well. During a shift in E&A she met the patient of an institution that treats addicts. Following the consultation, the patient revealed that the new doctor in her usual group practice had become over-familiar. Two months previously the patient had an appointment with the practice as she was suffering from permanent nausea. The new doctor made her lie in front of him, with her upper body fully exposed, for longer than necessary, without examining her. She did not understand why he asked her about her preferred sexual practices. Playfully he told her that regular physical proximity to a man was important for her. When she took her leave, he invited her for a drink.

After this event she broke down completely, because the doctor's strange behaviour had left her very confused and hurt. Above all she started to doubt herself: might she have sent out the wrong signals that led to this situation? Since then she no longer trusted herself to return to the group practice, which is why she came to E&A accompanied by a carer.

Taboos will be broken

The foreign colleague was appalled and wanted to report the offending colleague, since this was the normal response in her home country. She went to her superior and reported the case and her intentions. But to her consternation her superior urged caution, advising her to take no action and not to rock the boat. After all, he said, "You didn't witness the incident yourself." She responded: "In my country such inappropriate behaviour would be immediately reported and the colleague would face sanctions." In her opinion, such action was essential for the protection and safety of patients; and for the colleague himself, in the interests of continuing his medical career. Somewhat exasperatedly, her boss replied that if she really wanted to do something, she could contact ReMed. This she did, and was interested to discover how such situations are handled in Switzerland.

Support rather than denunciation

ReMed does not view itself as a point of contact for denouncing colleagues. ReMed would prefer colleagues who overstep boundaries to report themselves. Ideally, ReMed would work with an affected colleague to find suitable professional support and help him find a way to deal with his harmful behaviour. ReMed acts as an open, non-judgemental support network for all colleagues. ReMed is also committed to finding new approaches for doctors who are too ashamed or insecure to admit their behaviour, and who keep their own counsel even if they would rather not.



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But many affected colleagues are reluctant to seek support themselves because they have little idea of how destructive inappropriate sexual advances can be. With the consent of the affected patient and the person seeking advice, ReMed can therefore also contact the offending colleague. Not to threaten him, but to outline the ways in which ReMed can help and ultimately protect both parties - patient and colleague - against any further inappropriate behaviour.

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