

Series in Professional Ethics

Recap on Propriety and Sexual Boundaries

In the 19th edition of the Singapore Medical Council's Newsletter, the first article under the Series of Professional Ethics titled "Propriety and Sexual Boundaries", was published to remind doctors of the need to pay heed to Guideline C4 of the 2016 Ethical Code and Ethical Guidelines. In brief, Guideline C4 of the ECEG sets out advice on how to ensure that patient-doctor relationships are considered proper in the eyes of patients and the community.

As patient-doctor relationships are based on confidence and trust, it is critical for doctors to maintain propriety and observe appropriate boundaries in their relationships with patients.

In the previous article, wherein doctors were reminded that in performing physical examinations of patients, they should ensure that a reasonable patient would feel safe, secure and comfortable, without any misconception or fear that his/her modesty is compromised or that he/she is being taken advantage of in a sexual manner. In this regard, some ways that doctors can go about assuring patients are set out below:

- (a) Involve a chaperone in the examination where a patient requests for one, or if the doctor assesses that the presence of a chaperone is necessary to set the patient at ease, or for the doctor's own protection;
- (b) Explain his or her actions before and during the examination; and
- (c) Be alert and responsive to verbal and non-verbal cues of unease.

Apart from the above, doctors may also refer to the corresponding section C4 in the SMC Handbook on Medical Ethics, which sets out clear and actionable guidance on how to deal with intimate examinations.

The SMC trusts that the above would serve as a useful reminder to all doctors on how to approach intimate examinations in accordance with the principles in the ECEG and HME. For more guidance on the issues above, [please refer to Guideline C4 of the 2016 ECEG and Section C4 of the HME.](#)