

Sleeping with the therapist

Dr Simon Wessely on why we need professional controls for counselling

One of the most famous figures in the history of psychiatry is a lady known to us as Anna O. She was suffering from hysteria, and was being treated by Josef Breuer, a colleague of Sigmund Freud. Breuer began to be troubled by Anna O's increasingly sexual advances to him and his own attraction to her. He terminated treatment and took his wife on a second honeymoon. Freud took over Anna O's therapy. From this episode came Freud's elaboration of the concept of transference.

Freud argued that a patient is attracted not to a doctor's individual charm or looks, but instead to an idealised version of what the doctor represents to the patient. Thus if a patient professes to be falling in love with the doctor, this information should be a powerful method of gaining access to the patient's previous experiences and inner world. Unfortunately, sometimes it can be a way of gaining access to far more than the patient's psyche.

There is increasing concern that some therapists exploit these powerful feelings in order to enter into a sexual relationship with the patient. However, determining the scale of the problem is difficult. Almost the only way of obtaining such data is by confidential surveys of mental health professionals. Unfortunately, anonymous surveys do not necessarily produce accurate data, and are difficult to verify. With this reservation, studies from America suggest that 5 to 10 per cent of therapists have had sexual contact with a patient. (This compares favourably with figures of 13 per cent for general practitioners and 18 per cent for obstetricians.)

Should we be concerned about these figures? The answer must be yes — but, as Dr Derek Jehu rather reluctantly concedes in his book, *Patients as Victims*, if finding out how often patient/therapist sex occurs is difficult, determining its precise effects is almost impossible.

The inevitable American survey that suggests that 75 per cent of patients who have had an affair with their therapist go on to develop post-traumatic stress disorder should be taken with the customary pinch of salt, but nevertheless, it is easy to list the disadvantages of sexual

contact between patient and therapist, and almost impossible to list any benefits from such activity.

What is it that leads a therapist to begin a sexual relationship with a patient? Dr Jehu is careful to avoid any simple answer, but his repeated use of the phrase "predatory therapist" indicates his personal view. In fact the stories revealed by British psychologists who answered a recent survey and admitted to at least one sexual contact with their clients suggest less the image of a predatory beast, and more a catalogue of ignorance, naivety and personal unhappiness.

Contrary to the stereotype of the older male psychotherapist seducing his young female client, one third of the psychologists who admitted any affair with a patient turned out to be women. Nevertheless, even if the epithet "predatory" seems misplaced, phrases such as incompetent, unprofessional and destructive are well deserved.

What should be done to prevent such abuses? In most states of America it is a criminal offence for a therapist to have sex with a patient, though there is more ambiguity about the position of the ex-patient. In Britain we have yet to tackle these issues with the same vigour, perhaps

because of our reluctance to confront the unacceptable face of therapy.

Doctors who are found guilty of having sex with patients will almost certainly be removed from the General Medical Council register, and thus be unable to work. But although psychologists may also, be removed from their professional register, all this means is that they cannot call themselves chartered psychologists. And a counsellor who sleeps with his patient has to change neither his title nor profession.

The case for greater regulation is powerful, although I hope we will favour strengthening professional control rather than allow lawyers to intrude on yet another aspect of professional life.

● Simon Wessely is a Consultant Psychiatrist at the Maudsley Hospital. *Patients As Victims: Sexual Abuse in Psychotherapy and Counselling by Dr Derek Jehu*, is published next week by John Wiley, £17.95.

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