

**Conflict of interest in counselling relationship
(12HDC01512, 20 February 2014)**

Counsellor ~ Ethical standards ~ Conflict of interest ~ Multiple relationships ~ Respect ~ Rights 1(1), 4(2)

A woman complained about the services provided to her by a counsellor, with whom she attended both individual counselling sessions and joint counselling sessions with her husband. One of the reasons for engaging the counsellor was for relationship counselling. The woman had three individual sessions with the counsellor before enquiring about the possibility of attending joint sessions with her husband.

The woman and her husband attended four joint sessions before making a decision to separate formally. From this point, the woman's estranged husband commenced individual sessions with the counsellor, the woman continued to attend individual sessions, and both the woman and her estranged husband also attended joint sessions with the counsellor.

The relationship between the counsellor and the woman broke down. The woman felt that the counsellor had become biased towards her estranged husband. Thereafter, for a short period of time, the woman and the counsellor continued to communicate by email. The counsellor admitted that she was disrespectful towards the woman in her communications.

It was held that the counsellor failed to recognise that providing services to the woman's estranged husband would be in direct conflict with the woman's interests. By supporting the woman's estranged husband against the woman's interests as the relationship broke down, by turning against the woman, and by continuing to counsel the woman's estranged husband, the counsellor acted in breach of the trust placed in her, as well as not acting impartially and neutrally. In doing so the counsellor failed to comply with ethical standards and breached Right 4(2).

The counsellor was also disrespectful to the woman in her email communications and breached Right 1(1).