

**Professional boundaries between a
psychologist and a recent former client
(07HDC08103, 9 November 2007)**

Psychologist ~ Professional boundaries ~ Standard of care ~ Failure to communicate with colleagues ~ Failure to document care ~ Rights 4(1), 4(2)

A principal psychologist complained about a breach of boundaries by a psychologist working in his service. The psychologist provided services to a client who was nearing the end of a prison sentence. When they developed feelings towards each other, the psychologist went to the principal psychologist, her manager, to discuss these feelings. It was agreed that she should no longer work with the man, and his care was transferred. In addition, the manager asked the psychologist to produce a management plan, which was to help her to deal with her feelings. However, soon after this meeting, contact recommenced, unknown to the psychologist's colleagues or her manager. The psychologist stated that she assisted the man with managing his suicidal thoughts, but she failed to mention this support, or to document her interactions.

As the psychologist had failed to produce a management plan, had failed to turn up to work, and had not been in contact after one supervision session, her contract was terminated.

Some time later, the man was rearrested at the psychologist's home for breach of his parole conditions. Both the psychologist and the man told the man's parole officer that they had been living together for two months. The psychologist stated that there was no sexual relationship, but admitted that the relationship was inappropriate and unethical. The man stated that the relationship was sexual, and that he and the psychologist were in a serious relationship.

It was held that, by failing to document the man's suicidal ideation and communicate her concerns about his condition to his psychologist, the psychologist failed to provide services with appropriate care and skill, and breached Right 4(1).

In addition, by failing to maintain appropriate boundaries and for falling below the standard required in the core competencies for psychologists relating to critical and constructive self-reflection and external review of her practice through adequate supervision, the psychologist breached Right 4(2).

The Director of Proceedings issued a charge before the Health Practitioners Disciplinary Tribunal. At a hearing on 4 August 2008 the psychologist admitted the charge, and the Tribunal cancelled her registration, lifted her name suppression and ordered her to pay a contribution to the cost of the investigation, prosecution and hearing.

Link to Health Practitioners Disciplinary Tribunal decision:
<http://www.hpdt.org.nz/portals/0/psy0884ddecdp070.pdf>