

Blurring of professional and personal boundaries 19HDC00489, 26 August 2020

A woman was engaged to provide life coaching and supervision services to a consumer who worked as a counsellor. The consumer's employer allowed the consumer to select the supervisor and did not check the supervisor's qualifications, but did pay for the costs of the supervision. The life coach did not have formal qualifications in counselling and was not registered with any regulatory authority.

During the professional relationship, the life coach also provided personal support to the consumer following a family tragedy. Subsequently, the life coach had an intimate relationship with the consumer's spouse. She has ceased providing life coaching services since these events.

Findings

Health services

The services provided by the woman to the consumer, both as a supervisor and as a life coach, and in particular following the family tragedy, were found to be materially similar to that of a counsellor. In addition, the services provided were found to be clearly for the purpose of promoting and protecting the consumer's health. The services provided to the consumer were therefore found to fall within the definition of "health services" for the purposes of the Health and Disability Commissioner Act 1994 and the Code of Health and Disability Services Consumers' Rights (the Code).

Ethical standards

It is important that people who provide counselling services maintain strict boundaries to avoid causing harm to their clients. The life coach was aware of the ethical standards for life coaches relating to professional boundaries.

The life coach was found to have neither set nor maintained professional boundaries when she supervised and counselled/coached the consumer. Instead, she blurred the boundary between their professional and personal relationships. Subsequently, the life coach formed a relationship with the consumer's spouse. This was a betrayal of trust and a departure from the duty of care. The life coach's knowledge that the consumer was a vulnerable client as a consequence of the family tragedy compounds the seriousness of the life coach's behaviour.

The life coach was found to have failed to comply with ethical standards by failing to maintain professional boundaries and, therefore, found to have breached Right 4(2) of the Code.

Professional supervision

The professional relationship between the life coach and the consumer came about partly as a result of the consumer engaging her to provide supervision services. The

supervision sessions were paid for by the consumer's employer as part of its offer to staff of financial assistance for supervision. The employer said that this was an optional part of its staff wellness programme.

The Commissioner stated that service providers who offer clinical staff professional supervision, whether as part of an optional or a compulsory scheme, should have stringent requirements in place to ensure that those who provide supervision are appropriately qualified.

Recommendations

The Commissioner recommended that the life coach undertake training on ethical standards and boundary issues should she recommence life coaching or supervision, and provide a formal written apology to the consumer.