Boundary Violations: Treating Colleagues, Family & Self
Considerations from the AMA Code of Medical Ethics

All 3 categories:

- Challenges for objectivity, open exchange of information, privacy and confidentiality, and informed consent.

- In emergencies or isolated rural settings when options for care by other physicians are limited or where there is no other qualified physician available, physicians should not hesitate to treat colleagues, family or self.

Colleagues

- Exercise objective professional judgment and make unbiased treatment recommendations despite the personal or professional relationship they may have with the patient.

- Be sensitive to the potential psychological discomfort of the physician-patient, especially when eliciting sensitive information or conducting an intimate examination.

- Respect the physical and informational privacy of physician-patients. Discuss how to respond to inquiries about the physician-patient’s medical care from colleagues. Recognize that special measures may be needed to ensure privacy.

- Provide information to enable the physician-patient to make voluntary, well-informed decisions about care. The treating physician should not assume that the physician-patient is knowledgeable about his or her medical condition.

Family

Physician POV:

- May fail to probe sensitive areas when taking the medical history or to perform intimate parts of the physical examination.

- May feel obligated to provide care for family members despite feeling uncomfortable doing so. Avoid providing sensitive or intimate care especially for a minor patient who is uncomfortable being treated by a family member.

- May also be inclined to treat problems that are beyond their expertise or training.

- Recognize that if tensions develop in the professional relationship with a family member, perhaps as a result of a negative medical outcome, such difficulties may be carried over into the family member’s personal relationship with the physician.

Family POV:

- May be reluctant to state their preference for another physician or decline a recommendation for fear of offending the physician.

- May be reluctant to disclose sensitive information or undergo an intimate examination when the physician is a family member. This discomfort may particularly be the case when the patient is a minor child, who may not feel free to refuse care from a parent.

When treating family or self:

- Document treatment or care provided and convey relevant information to the primary care physician.

Self

- In general, physicians should not treat themselves unless emergency/isolated setting or for short-term, minor problems.