



CONDUCT COUNTS!

Professional Conduct

SCENARIO

Debbie has worked in large community hospital for over 10 years. She loves her job, loves being an RT, and considers her co-workers, RTs and other health care professionals, close friends. On this particular day, Debbie was working in an acute unit of the hospital. As she entered the room to attend to a patient, Mr. X, she noticed that he was unconscious and another health care professional and friend, Paula, was at his bed side. Debbie and Paula began to chat about their day. At one point, Paula commented on Mr. X's physique and that she found him to be very attractive and commented on certain aspects of his body. Debbie had a good laugh, made a comment in agreement. They both continued to perform their duties and left the room.

Debbie went home that night and reflected upon her practice that day. She started to feel guilty about making the comment about the patient at his bed side. In hindsight, she felt they were unprofessional. But, Debbie decided that she didn't bring up the topic, and she only made one comment in agreement, so it wasn't a big deal.

About a week passed and Debbie found herself on the same unit. This time, Debbie along with Paula and a few other co-workers were standing near the nursing station. Another co-worker, Denise, stated, "so I heard you, (pointing to Debbie), have a crush on Mr. X in room 101. Paula told me all about it". Denise proceeded to recap the interaction between Paula and Debbie a week prior. Paula jumped in and stated; "can you blame her", and proceeded to comment again on the patient's physique. Debbie, although feeling a bit uncomfortable about the topic, laughed out loud and nodded in agreement to Paula's comment.

Little did Debbie know, Mr. X's partner was standing around the corner and heard the whole conversation. Mrs. X was horrified by the comments. Here she was, worried about her partner's wellbeing, while the people assigned to care for him were objectifying him. She was now concerned whether the health care professionals were competent at their duties. She went to the unit manager and complained immediately.

RESULTS

A complaint was received by the CRTO by Mrs. X regarding Debbie's conduct. In the complaint, Mrs. X alleged that Debbie had made inappropriate comments about Mr. X and that it was unprofessional and undermined her confidence in the care Mr. X was receiving.

As part of the mandatory follow-up done by CRTO, an investigation was launched into the conduct of Debbie. Her co-workers were interviewed and internal investigation records from when Mrs. X complained to the hospital were obtained. When co-workers were asked to recap what occurred on the two incidents, all recalled that Debbie was involved in the conversation fully, and that she made comments along with Paula. Mrs. X also stated that Debbie was fully involved in the conversation.

In Debbie's response to the CRTO investigation, she stated that she understood that the conversations were very unprofessional; however, she really wasn't a part of the conversations, rather just listening in and laughing.

Given the abundance of information in front of the Inquires, Complaints and Reports Committee, stating that Debbie was engaged in the unprofessional conversation, Debbie was given a letter of advice and asked to submit an essay on the importance of being professional in the work place.



PROFESSIONALISM

"Professionalism" or professional conduct is a term often used to describe the behaviours that are expected of individuals who hold a certain role in society. A "professional" is typically someone who has obtained skills that are recognized as requiring specific, intensive training and who applies those skills in a position impacting others (e.g., engineer, lawyer, RT, PT, MD, etc.). Professionals are often held to moral, ethical and legal standards because of this potential impact.



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EXPECTATION

The nod and laugh heard around the world! We may never know exactly what comments were said or not said by Debbie. But, at the end of the day, the conversations occurred, and they were clearly unprofessional. So what could Debbie have done differently to avoid what happened to her?

Consider the following standard statements from the CRTO Standards of Professional Practice:

4. Therapeutic & Professional Relationships:

- Section 4.1: upholding a respectful attitude for the dignity of the patient/client by maintaining a high standard of professional conduct;
- Section 4.9: treating all patient/client equitably without regards for age, race, religion, gender, body type, sexual orientation, type of illness or level of physical or cognitive ability;
- Section 4.10: treating patients/clients with dignity and with respect for their right to privacy, autonomy and independence at all times;
- Section 4.14: maintaining a respectful relationship with members of the public to facilitate awareness and understanding of the Respiratory Therapy profession;
- Section 4.19: maintaining clear and appropriate professional boundaries in all professional interactions.

BOTTOM LINE

It's always important to be aware of your communication around patients and/or their loved ones, and to appreciate how they may perceive it. You are in a position of power, and in most cases, the patient and/or their family are in a vulnerable position. Any comment that is unprofessional, regardless of how small the comment is, can break the trust built into the therapeutic relationship. In this situation, Debbie could have not engaged in any way with the comments being said. She could have reminded her co-workers of their professional obligations. If the conversation persisted, simply walk away. She could have brought up her concerns in a staff meeting, or followed-up with her manager.

RESOURCES

[A Commitment to Ethical Practice](#)

[Abuse Awareness & Prevention Professional Practice Guideline](#)

[CRTO Standards of Practice](#)

