

The University of Newcastle: Navigating boundary challenges in medicine



Associate Professor Lisa Lampe,
lead researcher and psychiatrist

Doctors need to be able to clearly set boundaries within the doctor-patient relationship. Importantly, they should also have appropriate professional boundaries with peers, friends, family and other healthcare professionals.



The potential for adverse consequences makes it clear that we need to be able to recognise and manage boundary challenges, as this is a priority for safe medical practice. However, navigating these challenges can be stressful.”

Lack of existing research

Associate Professor Lampe’s interest in this research comes from her own experiences as a doctor specialising in psychiatry and having an interest in anxiety, as well as having a longstanding role as a medical educator.

“I recognised the importance of understanding the challenges of navigating non-sexual boundaries and realising that they are common and stressful, but doctors only have limited preparation in dealing with them. All of these factors contributed to my interest in this area,” says Associate Professor Lampe.

Currently, there is a lack of empirical research regarding the frequency and impacts of non-sexual boundary violations among doctors. The outcomes from the research could identify the types of boundary challenges that create distress and threaten patient outcomes, which could be of critical importance.

Challenges in setting boundaries

Associate Professor Lampe’s research explores doctors’ and medical students’ awareness of boundary issues, such as how frequently these are experienced, associations with stress and burnout, and what personal and professional problems may follow.

Associate Professor Lisa Lampe of the University of Newcastle was the lead researcher of the project that received an Avant Foundation grant. She is a psychiatrist with national and international recognition of her clinical expertise in anxiety disorders.

The research will identify gaps in doctors’ and medical students’ knowledge, perceived educational needs around skills to manage boundary challenges, as well as the impact it can have on patient care and occupational stress levels.

“By identifying perceived impacts and current levels of awareness, this project represents a first step in fixing a current gap in the education and professional development of doctors,” says Associate Professor Lampe.

Analysing awareness and knowledge

The 12-month study will use online survey methods, including questionnaire measures and case vignettes. Case vignettes will be used to test awareness of boundaries and explore attitudes, experience and confidence in managing issues.

Results are expected to inform future educational initiatives, in efforts to reduce risk. It may also help understand whether there are particular stages of training or types of practice that are associated with more boundary challenges. This information could be helpful for educational initiatives around quality, safety and professionalism at all stages of a medical career.