Is it OK to pursue a relationship with a patient?

**QUESTION:**

One of my patients is going through a tough divorce, and I've listened as she's shared frustrations about child custody issues and finances. Lately, I've started confiding in her about personal matters and find myself attracted to her. Since we're both consenting adults, is it okay to pursue a relationship with her?

**ANSWER:**

The fact that you are attracted to this patient and are interested in pursuing a relationship with her means you should terminate the doctor-patient relationship immediately. Dating a patient, or even a former patient, is a decision that could put your reputation and your career in jeopardy. (See related article on Dating Patients.)

You mention that you are both consenting adults. However, from a legal standpoint, you are not on equal footing due to the imbalance of power in the doctor-patient relationship. It has been our experience that when these relationships go sour there is higher likelihood of claims. If this happens, contending the relationship was consensual likely will not hold up in a court of law.

To protect yourself, wait the period of time designated by your state board before initiating any personal relationship with a former patient. Laws vary from state to state but waiting periods range from six months to several years or more. In fact, some states never permit a doctor to date a former patient—no matter how much time has gone by.

In the future, remember to keep all patient relationships on a professional level. Of course, you need to listen to your patients to convey warmth and caring. And, as a doctor who is committed to the total health needs of your patients—emotional as well as physical—you may choose to lend a compassionate ear when patients share their problems. However, be careful not to cross the line by disclosing your own personal problems. Many doctors have found doing so begins a chain of events, which can lead to improper behavior.