

A Breach of Trust

It was after 6pm and I needed to see a doctor. The night before my long-term boyfriend and I had sex without any protection, and I wanted to get the morning after pill to prevent pregnancy.

I was busy that day and couldn't see my regular GP so I went to an all night medical centre.

The doctor asked me a range of questions – he wanted to know if I had ever experienced heart problems, high blood pressure or whether I had any illnesses.

Although I told him I was in a state of good health he asked me to get on the examination table. I was confused. He said he wanted to see if he could detect any pain in my abdominal area.

I got on the table as ordered although I didn't believe an examination was necessary.

After pushing and prodding my stomach area he started to run a finger or thumb across my hair line and then he tried to pull my trousers down further. I flinched and held on to my trousers to stop him from pulling them down further.

He could see I was uncomfortable but he continued until it became clear I was getting distressed.

As I was sitting at his desk waiting for the prescription he just sat there staring at the note pad. We sat in uncomfortable silence for what seemed like the longest time. I kept watching him during this strange encounter wondering what was going through his mind.

The silence became unbearable and so I asked whether he was going to give me the prescription. My voice seemed loud and lifted him from the strange trace like state he was in.

He apologized for the delay and then pulled some pills from a drawer and handed them to me.

This was not the first time I had left a doctor's surgery feeling uncomfortable.

When I was 17 I went to see a doctor about a rash on my neck. I didn't have a regular GP, he was just someone who had a surgery down the road from where I worked.

After telling the middle aged man about my rash he asked me to

take all my clothes off. I asked him why and he said he wanted to see if the rash was anywhere else on my body. I told him the rash was confined to my neck but he still insisted I take all my clothes off.

I refused which made him annoyed. He told me he was not able to diagnose my rash and sent me on my way.

I discovered some time later that the rash was due to an allergic reaction to nickel, found in some jewelry.

After the second unpleasant experience with a doctor I started asking women I knew whether they had encountered similar experiences.

Mary's story

Mary's story is the one that upset me the most.

At the time of the incident Mary was an attractive 38 year old. Although she was short in stature she had a great figure. Her key to success was eating well and exercising regularly.

Mary never had health problems so she was surprised when her doctor told her that she had an abnormal pap smear and would have to have some cells cauterized. She was sent along to a leading Canberra gynecologist hoping all would be fixed.

The visit to the specialist was to change her life.

During the appointment where she was to undergo the procedure, the gynecologist asked Mary to take all her clothes off – he said he wanted to take some measurements because he thought she looked too thin. She asked for a gown but instead he gave her a small sheet.

The sheet was too small to wrap around her so she held it up against her body. He asked her to come into the centre of the room. He then told her to outstretch her arms. She became uncomfortable because she knew if she outstretched her arms the sheet would fall to the floor. She stood there not knowing what to do.

He raised his voice and demanded that she do as he requested. "For god sake I am a doctor – do as I say and outstretch your arms".

As the sheet fell to the floor, so began the nightmare that plagued her for the rest of her life.

After staring at Mary's naked body for what seemed like an eternity to her, the specialist asked her to get on the bed so he could start the procedure. She went to pick up the sheet but he told her sternly to leave it where it was. He carried out the procedure while Mary lay naked on the bed.

Until Mary revealed her story to me, she had never told another person, not even her husband who she loved dearly. She was riddled with guilt because she did what the doctor told her to do.

Where once Mary was slim and athletic, after the incident she gained weight and stopped exercising. She blamed her beauty for the violation and so her body had to be punished.

Sharon's story

Sharon had not long moved to Melbourne when she had her unpleasant encounter with a doctor. She needed a few days off work because she came down with a big dose of the flu.

The doctor she decided to see was located near her new residence. He was about 50 and seemed quite nice at first. He asked her questions about where she came from, what sort of job she had and why she had moved to Melbourne.

He then enquired about her health. He asked how long it had been since her last breast examination. She thought this was a little strange considering this was her first visit and all she wanted was something to help relieve her flu symptoms.

She told him she regularly had examinations but still he insisted she remove her top and bra.

Sharon is a 14DD and was used to men leering at her size, but this experience left her shattered. At first she didn't want to believe the doctor was anything but professional but as his fondling became sexual she became very uneasy. She left his surgery that day and found another GP.

Rebecca's story

Rebecca as 18 and living in a small country town in northern NSW when she had her bad experience with a GP, but it wasn't until she was referred to a specialist that she realized her doctor had acted inappropriately.

She went to see her local doctor about a red and itchy rash on her back. She had known the doctor for years and trusted him implicitly.

Because he was the family doctor she was not concerned when he asked her to take all her clothes off, and even though he didn't offer her a gown or sheet she didn't think there was a problem.

It was only during her examination with the specialist that she became aware of her GP's breach of trust. Rebecca began to remove all her clothes as she had done with her GP but the specialist told her it was not necessary for her to disrobe entirely – at that moment she realized her GP had acted inappropriately with her.

Mandy's story

A visit to a gastroenterologist a few years ago left Mandy not trusting any male doctors.

Mandy was referred to a specialist because her GP was concerned the pain she was experiencing may have involved the pancreas.

During the examinations conducted by her female GP Mandy had never been asked to remove her bra so she was surprised when the specialist asked her to.

Although he allowed her to leave her top on he lifted it up during the examination, fully exposing her naked breasts. Mandy felt very uncomfortable and pulled her top down to cover her breasts. Despite the specialist sensing her obvious uneasiness he lifted it up again. He did not offer any explanation as to why it needed to be up nor did he show any sensitivity to her distress.

Megan's story

Finding a GP who practiced alternative therapies in conjunction with conventional medicine is rare so when Megan found one shortly after moving to Perth she was thrilled.

For years Megan had been fighting Chronic Fatigue and she was relieved to find someone in her new surroundings who understood the illness and was willing to try different methods to cure her.

He offered hypnotherapy and this technique came in handy when Mandy broke up with her boyfriend. She took the break-up very badly and no matter how hard she tried to get over it she got deeper into depression. During this bleak period she visited her GP every week – sometimes the sessions would last an hour despite his full waiting room.

It was about the sixth visit after the break-up that the GP destroyed her trust. He hypnotized her like usual but this time he told her she was having a wonderful hot and steamy shower. He told her she had creamy perfumed soap on her hands and that she needed to lather her body.

Because she believed she was in the shower she did as he suggested. The doctor told her to rub her intimate area and as she was doing this he suggested she was having an orgasm and that it was the best orgasm she ever had.

Before waking her up he told her not to remember anything about the session but by then she was no longer hypnotized, she just hadn't opened her eyes. As she got up to leave he hugged her and that was when she felt his erection.

Megan still wonders why the GP betrayed her trust at a time when she was so emotionally low.

Although these women had different experiences, there is one similarity – none of them reported their experiences. In nearly all cases I was the first person they told their secrets to.

When interviewed some years ago, Ken Patterson, ex-Commissioner for Health Complaints in the ACT, said it was not unusual for women to remain silent about unpleasant experiences with medical practitioners.

He said guilt, shame and not knowing who to contact or where to go are some of the reasons women don't report their experiences.

Mr Patterson believed that although the majority of health professionals do not take advantage of their patients, there are a number who do engage in improper and unprofessional behavior.

To help stop health professionals abusing their patients, victims should report incidences to their local health complaints commissioner (addresses below). All reports received by these independent agencies are treated confidentially.

VICTORIA

Health Services Commissioner
Complaints and Information
30th Floor
570 Bourke Street
Melbourne Vic 3000
Telephone: (03) 8601 5200
Toll Free: 1800 136 066
Fax No.: (03) 8601 5219
TTY No. 1300 550 275
E-mail: hsc@dhs.vic.gov.au

QUEENSLAND

Health Quality and Complaints Commission
Level 18
288 Edward Street
Brisbane QLD 4000
(GPO Box 3089, Brisbane, QLD 4001)
Telephone: (07) 3120 5999
Toll Free: 1800 077 308 (outside the Brisbane area)
TTY: (07) 3120 5997
Facsimile: (07) 3120 5998
Email: info@hqcc.qld.gov.au

NEW SOUTH WALES

Health Care Complaints Commission
Level 13
323 Castlereagh Street (corner of Hay St)
Sydney NSW 2000
Telephone: (02) 9219 7444
Toll Free: 1800 043 159 (within NSW)
Fax No: (02) 9281 4585
TTY No: (02) 9219 7555
Email: hccc@hccc.nsw.gov.au

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

SA Ombudsman
Level 5 East Wing
50 Grenfell St
Adelaide SA 5000
Telephone: 08 8226 8699
Toll Free: 1800 182 150
Fax: 08 8226 8602

TASMANIA

GPO Box 960
Hobart Tas 7001
Toll Free: 1300 766 725
Fax: (03) 6233 8966
Email: health.complaints@justice.tas.gov.au
Hobart office
Ground Floor, 99 Bathurst Street
Hobart Tas 7000
Launceston Office
Henty House, 1 Civic Square
Launceston Tas 7250

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

The Office of Health Review
Level 12
St Martin's Tower
44 St Georges Terrace
Perth WA 6000
(GPO Box B61, Perth WA 6838)
Telephone: (08) 9323 0600
Facsimile: (08) 9221 3675
Country Free Call: 1800 813 583 (within WA)
TTY: (08) 9323 0616

ACT

ACT Health Services Complaints Commissioner
12 Moore Street
Civic ACT 2601
(PO Box 158, Canberra City ACT 2601)
Telephone: (02) 6205 2222

NORTHERN TERRITORY

Commissioner for Health & Community Services Complaints
12 Floor, NT House
22 Mitchell Street
Darwin NT 0800
(GPO Box 1344, Darwin NSW 0801)
Telephone: (08) 8999 1969
Toll Free: 1800 806 380
Fax No: (08) 8999 1828
Alice Springs
Ground Floor
Centepoint Building
Hartley Street
Alice Springs NT 0870
(PO Box 2388, Alice Springs NT 0871)
Telephone: (08) 8951 5818
Fax: (08) 8951 5828