

# Addressing Sexual Harassment in Your Practice



In 2017, sexual harassment claims dominated news coverage and social media forums. Claims of sexual misconduct and harassment have certainly clouded — if not ended — the careers of once powerful and publicly respected celebrities, and the **#MeToo** movement has encouraged and empowered many ordinary people to come forward with their stories of being harassed and treated inappropriately. The healthcare field is not immune to claims of sexual harassment.



## The rise of sexual harassment claims



## **Are you protecting your team?**

Healthcare organizations are responsible for the protection of their employees. Practice owners must understand sexual harassment by non-employees is a serious allegation and protecting their employees from this harassment is of the utmost importance.

Practice owners should provide policies, procedures, and education on sexual harassment. These documents should include a definition and examples of sexual harassment by patients, visitors, and family, in addition to all other types of harassment. This education should be presented upon hire and periodically to ensure understanding.



# Handling Sexual Harassment

The provider must first ask the harassing patient to stop before attempting to proceed with care. If the patient doesn't stop or the physician still feels uncomfortable, possible steps include:

- Exiting the room and asking for help from another healthcare professional
- Filing a report/ documenting the incident
- Transferring care to another physician with explicit warnings about the patient's behavior

# Do You Have a Policy in Your Practice?

In a December 2017 survey of over 1200 healthcare practices on whether they had a sexual harassment policy in place:

**84%**

Yes

**12%**

No

**4%**

I don't know...

# Improving Policies in Practice

Every health care organization needs to promote a clear, comprehensive policy that conveys a firm commitment to safety, respect, inclusion and equality. It should contain guidelines for:

- Policy Statement
- Prohibited behavior
- Employee reporting of sexual harassment
- Practice responses to offensive or abusive behavior, discrimination, and retaliation
- Consequences for violating the policy

In addition, secure methods of reporting harassment should be readily available to employees.



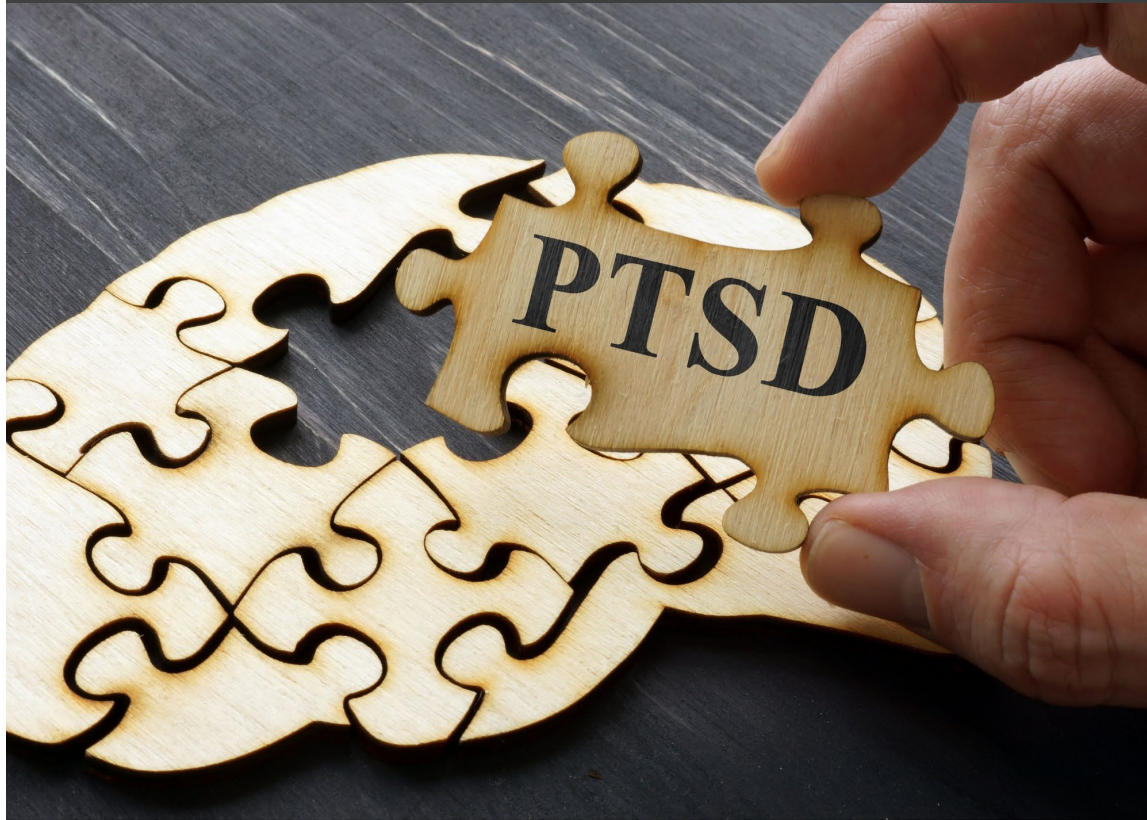
# Reporting Harassment in the Practice

Practice team members must be made aware of the issue; they cannot act on what they do not know. Anytime a member of the team experiences sexual harassment from a patient or their loved ones, it's critical that you are notified right away.

1. Use the words of the person
2. Describe the action if applicable
3. Name witnesses

It is the practice owner's responsibility to investigate, following the steps outlined in the organization's policies and procedures. Based on the information gathered, an action plan should be developed and followed. This action plan may include:

1. Discussing the complaint with the suspected perpetrator
2. Developing a behavioral contract
3. Removing the visitor or family member from the practice



Conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder, dementia, and traumatic brain injury can be used to explain inappropriate touching or behavior. However, even if these acts of sexual harassment are not intentional, it should not be tolerated.

## **Unintentional Harassment**



# ERASE Harassment from Your Practice

There's no right way to address mistreatment by patients. Instead, the goal is to arm doctors and staff with real-world strategies they can implement in the moment:

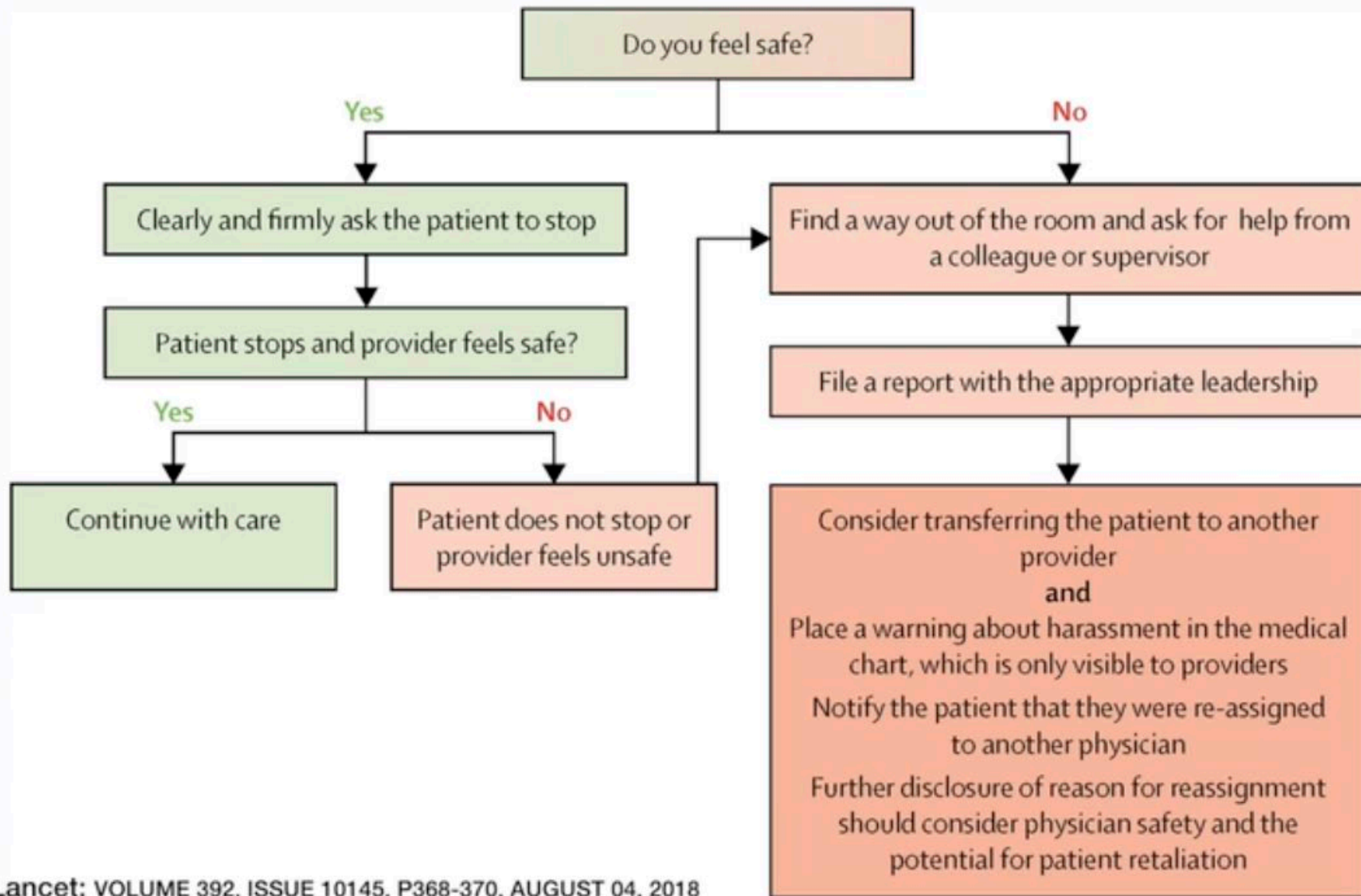
**Expect.** With more than one in four healthcare providers reporting patient-initiated sexual harassment, it's important for you and your team to expect misbehavior to happen – and come up with a plan for protection. Watch where you stand, come up with a way to signal for help, or bring someone into the room with you.

**Recognize.** Check in with yourself and pay attention to how patients treat your team. Does the encounter feel innocent and does the patient seem to be making an attempt at small talk? Or does it feel icky and uncomfortable? If you see something that doesn't feel right with you, say something.

**Address.** Come up with a script so you're able to address the mistreatment when it happens. If you set boundaries early, you may be able to avoid the incident escalating. Practice – Practice – Practice

**Support.** Check in with your teams when you see misbehavior. Make them feel comfortable sharing incidents with you.

**Establish/Encourage.** Develop training for how to handle patient harassment.



The Lancet: VOLUME 392, ISSUE 10145, P368-370, AUGUST 04, 2018

# Is Our Behavior Appropriate?



# Is Our Behavior Appropriate?

The only reason I laugh  
at your inappropriate  
jokes in the office is  
because I'm killing you  
in my mind.



your  cards  
someecards.com

**That's  
Awkward...**



# Female Providers Describe Sexual Harassment from Patients



A patient made a comment that he would grab my breast if I caused him pain.

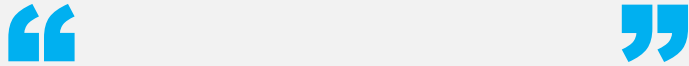


An 80-year-old man insists on hugging tightly at the end of each visit.

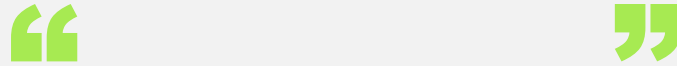


Patients frequently comment on how pretty I am and ask me out on dates.

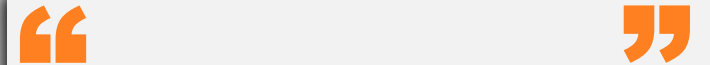
# Male Providers Describe Sexual Harassment from Patients



The patient took off her shirt without being instructed to do so. I told her it was inappropriate and had a female employee come in the room with me.



Gifts and messages. Waiting for me by my car in the parking lot. Invitations to touch the patient in an inappropriate way.




It amazed me how much it unsettles me as a guy when patients ask me out or behave inappropriately.



# Thank You

 Kristi Hudson, CPCO

 (888) 719-9990

 [Kristi@chirohealthusa.com](mailto:Kristi@chirohealthusa.com)

 <http://www.fchirohealthusa.com/>