

Relationship boundaries in providing joint marriage counselling (02HDC01167, 22 June 2004)

*Counsellor ~ Relationship counselling ~ Professional and ethical standards ~
Right 4(2)*

A woman complained about the services provided by a pastor and trained counsellor to her husband and herself. The counsellor already had a longstanding pastoral relationship with the couple, having shared meals with them and been the celebrant at their marriage. He also had an established professional counselling relationship with the husband, to whom he had provided counselling in relation to his first marriage. The woman complained that the counsellor was biased towards her husband, and said that he insisted that she had repressed memory syndrome and had been abused as a child. She also complained that the clinical sessions were not conducted appropriately.

During an individual counselling session with the husband, he initially raised concerns about the marriage, and the counsellor recommended joint marriage counselling sessions. This recommendation was reiterated at a later individual session with the husband, and subsequently the couple attended four joint sessions with the counsellor. During this time the husband continued to see the counsellor individually, and the wife also saw the counsellor plus a second counsellor for individual counselling. Sometime during the joint counselling, the two individual counsellors met (with the couple's agreement) to discuss their relative roles in counselling the wife. The joint counsellor also twice discussed with his clinical supervisor the difficulties involved in the counselling relationship, and eventually joint counselling was discontinued on the supervisor's advice. After the joint sessions ended, the husband resided with the counsellor and his wife for a time, which the counsellor explained as a situation of "refuge" when the husband needed a safe environment.

The difficulties centred on the wife's perception of bias on the part of the counsellor towards her husband — tending to reinforce what the husband said and not allowing her to clarify points she made. She felt that neither the counsellor nor her husband listened to her. When she disclosed abuse suffered in her first marriage, she believes that the counsellor decided she must have been abused as a child and had repressed memory syndrome, and that this affected the way he treated her in counselling. The wife's individual counsellor confirmed that the couple's counsellor believed that the wife had been abused as a child, as he mentioned it to her at their meeting.

It was held that the counsellor's decision to provide marriage counselling to the couple, and his failure to carefully set and monitor the boundaries of his relationship with them, did not comply with professional and ethical standards, and thus breached Right 4(2). When counsellors have prior relationships with one or both parties to a professional counselling relationship, they need to take extreme care at the outset to establish the boundaries of the new relationship; if there is any doubt about the ability to fairly counsel the couple, a referral should be made.

The counsellor was found not to be in breach of the Code with regard to his belief that the woman suffered from repressed memory syndrome and childhood abuse. Expert advice was that an experienced counsellor may have had grounds for forming such a view. No further action was taken on the issue of bias, although the counsellor's attention was drawn to the comments of the expert advisors that in such circumstances it would be difficult to uphold the appearance and practice of impartiality; nor on the

issue of conduct of the counselling sessions, as there was no evidence that the counsellor's professional skill during these sessions fell below accepted standards.