

## Managing boundaries when your patients are your neighbors

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When you see a patient outside of a clinical setting, follow the patient's lead, but avoid discussing his or her problems

**P**sychiatrists—especially residents—often prefer to reside close to the hospitals in which they train and work. Training programs in urban settings may offer their residents housing either attached to the hospital or immediately adjacent to it.

Psychiatry residents often discover their most ill patients also prefer to live close to the hospital. They become acquainted with their neighbors on the streets and in the emergency room. As a consequence, new residents must learn how to maintain appropriate boundaries in these situations.

### Patients as neighbors

Chronic psychiatric patients are likely to utilize the services of the closest hospital. Individuals with severe mental illness seem especially prone to move to and live in areas near a hospital. For example, a study of VA patients with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and depression found those with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder were more likely to move closer to their health care providers.<sup>1</sup> Also, many hospitals and training programs are located in inner-city areas, where individuals with severe mental illness are known to cluster.<sup>2-4</sup>

### Managing boundaries

When encountering their chronically mentally ill patients on the street, psychiatric residents could have a host of reactions—ranging from becoming over-involved in their patients' lives to completely avoiding them—that could cause them and their patients significant distress. The literature on boundary management in these situations is immense, and conclusions often are nebulous. Most authors suggest if a psychiatrist encounters a patient outside of the office, he or she should follow the patient's lead while trying to avoid discussing the patient's problems in public.<sup>5</sup>

It is important for residency training programs to educate residents on how to manage these professional boundaries. Residents should seek out support from their training department when they encounter these difficult situations.

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### Disclosure

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