



ACCEPTING GIFTS

Scenario

Robin has been working with a client, James, for several weeks when they drop by with an appreciative note and a gift card to a local restaurant as a thank you for the excellent physical therapy care provided. Robin gladly accepts, especially as the gift card is to one of their favourite restaurants.

A week later, James asks Robin if they have used the gift card; they haven't. James says they'd love to join Robin for dinner at the restaurant. Robin isn't sure they want to accept; the request is making them think that perhaps the client is interested in pursuing a personal relationship. Robin decides to tell James that the gift card has already been used for a great meal and diverts the conversation back to physical therapy treatment.

The following week James asks Robin to request a treatment extension from their insurer, which Robin doesn't believe is necessary. Robin decides the ethical thing to do is explain to the client that this request cannot be made based on objective measures. The client is unhappy and cancels their next appointment.

Two weeks later Robin's clinic supervisor approaches Robin to say the client wrote a letter complaining that Robin had accepted a \$150.00 gift card which was inappropriate and wants to be reimbursed.

What were Robin's options when the gift was offered, and what might they want to consider?

Accepting or Declining Gifts - Recognizing the Risk

It's important to be aware that whenever a gift is accepted, it comes with a degree of risk. From a financial perspective, as physical therapists we have already been paid to provide our services to our clients, and no further compensation is required. We've also heard from physical therapists who have noticed that (for example) when clients see their physical therapist accepting holiday gifts, they may feel obligated to give gifts themselves. In response, one clinic decided to post a sign indicating that they respectfully declined gifts from clients.

The therapeutic relationship between a health care professional and the client exists for one purpose only – to provide physical therapy services **for the benefit of the recipient**. There is the potential for boundaries to be blurred when gifts are accepted, because



now the physical therapist is benefiting personally from the therapeutic relationship in ways other than the agreed upon fee for service. Accepting gifts can lead to the perception that there is a personal or reciprocal relationship, as opposed to a professional relationship, between the client and physical therapist.

Once the boundaries between personal and professional relationships start to blur, the risk rises. Will your professional judgment be influenced by accepting the gift, or will your client misunderstand the nature of your relationship or feel entitled to “perks” or special treatment?

In general, accepting gifts is part of a personal relationship, not a professional one. Accepting a gift from a client always carries some degree of risk; often the ‘strings attached’ are not visible until later, when the gift can no longer be returned. However, there may be instances where the therapeutic relationship would be harmed by not accepting the gift. For example, in some Indigenous communities the refusal of a gift may be considered offensive, disrespectful, or culturally inappropriate; or if a client arrives with homemade cookies, refusal could be damaging to the therapeutic relationship. In these instances, the size and importance of the gift should be considered, both in terms of risk and conflict of interest, but also in terms of how it might appear to an onlooker. Accepting cookies may be seen as more reasonable than accepting expensive tickets to a sporting event, even if the “cost” to the client may be similar or less. However, even an inexpensive gift can carry meaning to the client; they may have made a special effort to acquire ingredients for the favourite cookies you once mentioned, or have taken a longer route to the clinic in order to bring you a coffee from your favourite coffeeshop.

We’ve also heard from physical therapists that sometimes it’s uncomfortable to accept even small gifts as they can represent a blurring of boundaries in the therapeutic relationship, and the client can misunderstand that there is a personal closeness which is reciprocated by the physical therapist. In these situations it is important to maintain professional boundaries and to weigh up the pros and cons of accepting or refusing these types of small gifts. Factors to consider may include when the gift is given (i.e. during treatment or after discharge), whether the gift can be shared (e.g. a box of chocolates which can be shared with all staff), and the possible motivation or feeling of obligation of the client to provide a gift.

When looking at the level of risk involved, it can be helpful to consider if you would be happy to disclose to your supervisor or colleagues (or friends and family) that you accepted a particular gift. How might receiving the gift be perceived by others? Or how would you feel if the gift (s) you accepted were listed on social media? If you feel discomfort thinking about this then the gift may be inappropriate for you to receive. Be prepared to graciously decline a gift you feel is inappropriate or unethical to accept.



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If you have questions about accepting gifts, please contact the College Practice Advisors.