

Doctors among hundreds to sexually abuse patients in Ohio

By Brooks Sutherland
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When five patients accused a Cincinnati doctor of touching their genitals with an ungloved hand from 1998 to 2006, it took the State Medical Board of Ohio *nine months* to revoke the doctor's license.

The board's first action was to allow Dr. Leo D'Souza to keep practicing with the caveat that he include a chaperone in the room when he treated minors. D'Souza was checking teenage patients for sexually transmitted diseases, he claimed of the allegations, which came from four minors, even though he was a psychiatrist treating patients for mental health issues.

In another case, twin brothers in Hamilton who were both charged with sexual misconduct involving minors received a *delayed reaction from the board even after they received convictions*. The board suspended Dr. Mark Blankenburg's license *a month after* his conviction and it revoked his brother Dr. Robert "Scott" Blankenburg's license in March 2010, *three months after* he pleaded guilty to charges.

The local cases are among hundreds across the state in which the medical board failed to protect Ohioans from serial sexual abusers and harassers over the last 40 years, a Columbus Dispatch investigation found.

Patients were raped and fondled while under anesthesia. Others were pestered during exams to go on dates with the physicians. Multiple more were masturbated in front of while being treated, medical board records show.

At least 256 Ohio doctors have been disciplined by the medical board for sexual misconduct since 1980, the investigation found. Ohio doctors from the Cincinnati region make up 12% of that number, as 33 local doctors have been disciplined for sexual misconduct in that time frame. And of those doctors, 10 still have active medical licenses, while 23 others have either expired, inactive, or closed licenses.

The numbers don't include an unknown total of cases that were never reported to the board or were never investigated. The Ohio Alliance to End Sexual Violence estimates that only 38% of child victims of sexual abuse come forward.

Harold Howard, an executive at the Talbert House and executive director of the agency's affiliate the Council on Child Abuse, called the findings "a tragedy," and urged oversight systems to re-evaluate the processes in place to protect Ohioans.

"This really devastates the entire family structure," he said of the abuse that has occurred of minors. " ...When things are not in alignment, everything has to be re-evaluated. We have to kind of hit the reset button and really spend some time digging deep to make sure that the current policies and procedures that are in place work and work for the people, most importantly, our young people."

Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine similarly recommended sweeping changes be made to the medical board via a working group he became a part of following the scandal of former Ohio State University Dr. Richard Strauss, insisting the board hasn't done enough to safeguard patients from dangerous doctors.

"Those numbers should shock everyone," DeWine told the Dispatch in response to its investigation. "It's clear that in the past at the state medical board there was a very passive culture in dealing with patients and sexual abuse, and doctors who were engaged in it."

A duty to protect Ohioans

D'Souza was accused of abusing at least five patients as a psychiatrist in Cincinnati. In 2002, D'Souza was alleged to have examined the genitals of a 12-year-old for the purpose of determining if the minor had engaged in sexual

activity, medical board records show. Other minors accused the psychiatrist of touching their genitals with an ungloved hand for similar purposes.

The board revoked D'Souza's license in 2009 and denied later appeals. D'Souza could not be reached for comment by either The Enquirer or Dispatch.

The Blankenburg brothers were both highly respected pediatricians and supporters of youth sports in southwest Ohio. They shared a lot in common besides being twins. They lived together, were unmarried and spent a lot of time taking photos of athletes at Hamilton High School as trusted photographers. That trust however quickly waned when allegations from young boys began to surface.

In addition to alleging the doctors had sex with underage boys, including some patients, prosecutors said the brothers paid for sex, bribed teens to keep quiet with drugs and money, and had hundreds of photos of teen boys, many of one boy in particular, bending over.

Mark Blankenburg was charged with unlawful sexual conduct with a minor in December 2008 and Robert "Scott" Blankenburg was charged with corruption of a minor a few months later.

But the board didn't act immediately. Mark Blankenburg was convicted in October 2009 and sentenced to up to 27 years in prison and his brother struck a plea deal in January 2010 with Butler County prosecutors to serve 13 years in prison. Even after the convictions, the board waited a month to suspend Mark Blankenburg's license and a few more to revoke his brother's license in 2010.

One former patient from Hamilton, who spoke to the Dispatch on the condition of anonymity, said he went to see Mark Blankenburg for a physical needed to play seventh grade football and after the doctor spent a long time examining his genitals, abuse continued for years. He was 12 when he first saw the doctor.

"It had to be 10 to 15 minutes. It felt like forever," he said of the examination. "I didn't really think anything about it, because I thought this is what a physical is. But when I look back at it, that was definitely inappropriate."

The brothers were unofficial team photographers for local youth sports and invited teens to their "party house" where they gave kids alcohol and drugs, the man said. Through the doctors, he became addicted to painkillers and heroin, he said. One day, the man said he was drinking beer at the brothers' house when one of the brothers gave him Xanax. He woke up to find his pants removed, pornography playing on the TV and Robert Blankenburg sitting on the floor nearby, he told the Dispatch. The doctor apologized to the man, a teenager at the time, for performing oral sex on him while he was unconscious. Robert Blankenburg promised it would never happen again. Then, a few weeks later it occurred a second time.

The Blankenburg brothers could not be reached for this story and declined to comment to the Dispatch.

Changes to procedures and policies

As officials weigh the need to make sweeping changes to ensure Ohioans are protected from serial abusers, some medical board leaders hope a bill first proposed last year is passed and helps bring reform.

The bill, proposed by Ohio Sen. Bob Hackett, R-Springfield, would require physicians on probation with the medical board for sexual misconduct to inform their patients.

The board itself began to make significant changes under new executive director Stephanie Loucka when she arrived in 2019. "(We're) really making sure that we're hitting all of the necessary steps along the way in a sexual misconduct case," she told the Dispatch "So that when we get to the end ... whether we're going forward or whether we have to close (it), we know everything that we need to have documented is documented."

Loucka came to the board following the controversy surrounding Strauss, in which the board was outed for inaction. Since taking over, the board has eliminated dates for cases and ramped up punishments for offenders.

Since January 2020, fines for sexual misconduct range from \$1,000 to \$5,000 if a doctor commits sexual misconduct without physical contact with a patient. If there is sexual contact, a doctor can be fined anywhere from \$6,000 to \$20,000.

Doctors who make suggestive comments or ask patients on a date will at least face probation, while doctors accused of physical sexual abuse could face a minimum of one-year suspension. The medical board also increased its staffing in 2022 for the first time since the 1990s.

DeWine said the medical board is moving in the "right direction" and added "we have to continue to be very, very diligent."

Howard hopes the changes will do more to protect young people, too.

"Hopefully bringing this to light will allow everybody to take a step back and really re-evaluate these systems to make sure that they're really doing what they need to do to protect and keep our young people safe," he added.

If you have been affected by any of the issues raised in this article, you can contact Dignity4Patients, whose helpline is open Monday to Thursday 10am to 4pm.