

## Ethics in dentistry

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### Abstract

A dentist is also a healthcare professional providing oral care to the patient, as does a physician. It is responsibility of dentist while practicing, to maintain a certain standard of service he or she is providing. For this, there is set of principles of professional conduct and all dentists should adhere to these principles when fulfilling their duties to patients, public, profession and colleagues.

**Keywords:** Ethics, dental professional, American Dental Association.

### Introduction

Ethics are moral principles that regulate the character and conduct of an individual or a group. Ethics word originates from Greek word ethos which means character or conduct. It is interchangeably used with the word moral which derived from Latin word mores, the meaning of mores is custom or habit. Therefore ethics are not decided by profession but these are moral obligations.<sup>1</sup> Ethics is a branch of philosophy and theology studying systematically what is right and good with respect to character and conduct.<sup>2</sup> Dentistry becomes a recognized specialty of medicine from a virtual trade, so principles of medical ethics should be respected and practiced. Also, the growing awareness and the intrinsic connection of oral health and overall health are giving rise to a more social conception of dentistry.<sup>3</sup> In today's society, the ethical issues faced by dentist are increasing and also become more complicated than those faced by dental professionals in past time.<sup>1</sup> Dental professionals are still among the most trusted professionals. Gallop polling in 1997, it is reported that dentists received high ranks in being the most trusted profession in United States of America.<sup>4</sup> So dentist should take care of this fact as the dental practice is changing very much under the influence of some factors such as malpractice crises, changing economic status of people and changing regulatory system of environment. So it is necessary that dentists understand the code of ethics.

### Why ethics are important

It is must to teach ethics to dentists, like to get a driver's license one has to pass a test about the "Rules of the Road." Similarly, before graduating and being licensed for dental practice, it is necessary for dental students to learn and be tested on the technical aspects of procedures they can perform and to be informed about professional codes of conduct, that are "Code of Ethics."<sup>5</sup> Ethics affect every decision made in dental office including both judging and choosing. Ethics also

have influence on relationships of dentist with patient, public, office staff and other professionals. Sometimes decisions are very simple and straight forward and at other times, these can be very complicated. Ethics are inseparably linked with these decisions of dental practice. Ignoring ethics, compromise dentists's service to patients and undermine their ability to function as a professional.

Ethics describes the physician's duty by asking them to consider and reconsider their actions, judgments and justification. It is application of general ethical principles and rules to resolve the problems of therapeutic practice, health care services and research.<sup>6</sup>

### Principles of ethics

A code of ethics defines the moral boundaries within which professional services may be ethically provided. Many dental organizations gave codes of ethical conduct for guidance of dentists in their practice. American Dental Association (ADA) gave five fundamental principles. These are; patient autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, justice, and veracity.

**Patient autonomy:** Term autonomy derived from Greek words Auto which means self and Nomos which means rule or governance. This principle states that dentist should respect patients self determination and confidentiality. Patient has right to make decisions regarding the treatment that he or she will receive. In modern dentistry, it is possible to treat even those cases that were not treated previously. So patient autonomy and informed consent become more important nowadays. Dentist should inform the patient about all the treatment options available, advantages, disadvantages and also consider referral to specialist. Then patient made final decision on treatment options. Most of times, there is difference between the needs of patient and his or her interests. So obtaining informed consent is necessary before providing any dental care to

the patient. According to Ozar and Sokol, nothing may be revealed to anyone else without patient's permission. Its duty of a dentist to keep the confidentiality of patient records and will provide any information on request of patient or another dentist in accordance with applicable law that will be beneficial for future treatment of patient. The U.K. General Dental Council's principle of patient confidentiality states that in exceptional situations, it may be justified to make confidential patient information known without consent of patient if it is the public interest or patient's interest. Thus autonomy principle requires every person to respect other person's self determination to an appropriate extent within the context of community.<sup>2,3,7</sup>

**Non-maleficence:** It is derived from Latin 'maxim primum non nocere' means 'first, do no harm'. It states that dentist must protect patient from any harm. In some dental procedures, there is double effect which means that while treatment procedure fixes one problem and it starts another issue. For such situations dentist should keep his or her knowledge and skills up to date, know their limitations and know when and under what conditions it may be justified to do a procedure that may cause harm to the patient. Dentist should also know when to refer a patient to specialist, when and under what situations delegation of patients care to auxiliaries is appropriate. Similar to medical profession, it's duty of dental professionals to inform the patient immediately if he or she has been exposed to blood or any other infectious material at dental office and also refer the patient immediately to a qualified medical practitioner for post exposure care and follow-up. Once a dentist starts dental treatment for a patient, he or she must see the treatment procedure till end. If for any reason dentist cannot complete the treatment procedure, it is responsibility of dentist to refer the patient to a specialist or colleague.<sup>2,3</sup>

**Beneficence:** It refers to promoting or doing well. It comes from Latin word benefactum which means 'good deed.' According to this concept, dentists have to practice to benefit their patients and have to take this as their duty. It is essential that dentist provide competent and timely care according to needs and desires of patient. The main aim of dental care should be optimum oral function/or appearance of dental set for patient. The achievement of this aim will depend on various factors such as age of patient, general health of patient, underlying anatomy, compliance and implementation of oral hygiene instructions by patient. This principle has several components: Community service such as providing free or discounted dental treatment to needful patients, reporting investigative findings that promote the health of general public and reporting symptoms related to domestic violence and child abuse to the proper authorities.<sup>2,3,8</sup>

**Justice:** It is responsibility of dental professionals to be fair in their dealings with patients, colleagues and society. According to Ozar and Sokol, society decides

what is just and unjust, so it is essential that dentists depend on suggestions from society to ensure ethical compliance. This principle states that dentist should treat patients without discrimination against race, creed, color, sex or national origin. There should be no discrimination when making referrals to other dental professionals. Ozar and Sokol states that primary considerations when making referrals should be given to the specialist's technical and communication skills, manner, and philosophy of dental practice. The consulting dentist should provide dental care to patient without interfering the treatment given by a previous dentist. But if he or she notices any gross faulty treatment by other dental professional, it is his or her responsibility to issue a public statement with respect to the profession that is based on truth.<sup>2,9</sup>

**Veracity:** It refers to truthfulness and respecting the trust that is necessary in the dentist-patient relationship. It involves truthful communication without deception and maintaining intellectual integrity. This concept explains truthfulness in billing and advertising. It is unethical for a dental professional to recommend treatment that is unnecessary and unnecessarily referral of patient to the specialist or recommendation of any product for own benefit. Advertising based on partial truth is also unacceptable. Dental professionals should also be truthful regarding their degrees and specializations held.<sup>2</sup>

### Is ethical behavior innate?

Ethical behavior may be innate, just like intelligence and personality that have genetic component, so may the characteristics make some people to act ethically and unethically. The willingness to follow the rules is innate and moral sense. Some people have this innate sense, which may be a more reliable method of differentiating between right and wrong rather than relying on any written code of ethics.

### Ethical issues

**Access to dental care:** A dentist should be available to provide care for potentially health threatening dental conditions and to decrease pain and suffering. A dentist must not restrict the access to dental care services beyond the limits of laws. Barriers that limit the access of physically impaired people should be eliminated to extent that can be reasonably fulfilled. Dental professionals must know the laws and regulations that govern discrimination and access to dental care services.<sup>2,10</sup>

**Abuse of prescriptions by patients:** The dentist must be known to patient's legitimate needs for prescription drugs. In case of suspected drug abuse, it is duty of dentist to refer the patient for evaluation. Close communication with pharmacies and other medical practitioners may be needed to restrain drug abuse.<sup>2</sup>

**Advertising:** Advertising is acceptable by most professional organizations but when it is used, it must

never be false or misleading. Advertising done in proper way may help people to understand the dental care available for them and how they can get it. Advertising must not: misrepresent fact and fee, create false expectations of good results, guarantee atypical results and imply unusual conditions.<sup>2</sup> There are many strategies that a dentist can use to build successful practice without breaking the law. A dentist can establish good rapport and strong customer base by various ways such as providing excellent dental care, demonstrating their clinical skills, a warm welcome of patient, a pleasant environment in dental office, free check-ups and comparatively low fees.<sup>11</sup> Communication is also an important factor in advertising. Good communication can improve both patient and staff interest and expectations.<sup>12</sup> Studies reported that dentist can use internal communication such as practice brochure, business cards, in-house information centers, thank you notes and direct mail to patients.<sup>13</sup> The aim of this should be to convey the clinic's services in a patient specific and caring tone.<sup>14</sup> Radio, television and newspaper advertisements are not as effective as internal communication methods such as newsletters, press release and personalized letters.<sup>15</sup>

**Consent:** Consent means voluntary agreement, compliance or permission. The concept of consent comes from ethical issue of autonomy, individual integrity and self determination and it also protects every patient's right not to be touched or treated in any way without patient's permission.<sup>16,17</sup> Depending upon the circumstances, consents are of different types such as implied consent, expressed consent, informed consent, proxy consent, loco patients, blanket consent and oral consent.<sup>18</sup> Consent has two purposes that are clinical and legal purpose. A valid consent consists of three aspects:

1. **Voluntariness** means patient should give consent voluntarily without any pressure from dentist or anyone else.
2. **Capacity to consent:** The patient should be in condition to understand the purpose, implication and consequences of treatment.
3. **Age of consent:** The age of consent is defined by legal laws and in Indian law; there are two schools of thought. According to one, consent by intoxicated person, person with unsound mind or a child below 12 years of age, is invalid. According to 2<sup>nd</sup> thought, a competent person of sound mind who has attained the age of 18 years can legally involve into a contract.<sup>19</sup>

For patients under age of minority or adults with mental disorder, consent is obtained from a parent or legal guardian. Any adult accompanying the child patient may not be a legal guardian, is not allowed to consent for dental treatment by law.<sup>20,21</sup>

### Disclosure and misrepresentation

Dental professionals should accurately represent themselves to the public. It is duty of dentist to show their professional qualifications accurately. The dentist should also disclose their commercial links with companies when recommending products of those companies.<sup>2</sup>

### Emergency care

A dentist should be available to handle acute dental conditions. In emergency condition, Patient should be examined and then either treated or referred for treatment. The patient's health must be priority in such situations rather than compensation or convenience.

### Financial arrangements

Fee for dental treatment should be consistent and fair to all patients. Fee should not vary based on patient's financial status, including insurance plans. In non emergency conditions fee and payment options should be explained to patient prior to start of any dental procedure.<sup>2</sup>

### Conclusion

Ethics had been an integral part of practice for thousands years ago. Dentistry, being one of the healing professions, has an obligation to society that dental professionals will adhere to high ethical standards of conduct. The code of ethics teaches all dentists to put their patient first, to involve the patient in treatment decisions and to consider the patient's expectations during treatment planning and maintaining confidentiality of patient. Ethics are critical to being a professional. Without a solid ethical foundation, one cannot be a true professional.

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