



ETHICS HANDBOOK FOR DENTISTRY




American College of Dentists

— SINCE 1920 —

*Advancing excellence, ethics, professionalism,
and leadership in oral healthcare.*

The American College of Dentists dedicates this document to the dental profession with the expectation that it will serve as a useful reference to the highest-held ideals of the College, ethics, and professionalism. It is intended to highlight ethical and professional responsibility, promote ethical conduct in dentistry, advance dialogue on ethical issues, and stimulate further reflection on common ethical problems in dental practice. Useful resources are available in this guide to help dental professionals navigate through difficult ethical decisions although it is not intended to solve specific ethical dilemmas. Dental professionals are strongly encouraged to further their understanding of ethics and ethical issues beyond this document.

For those who hold the privileges and responsibilities of a dental professional, this document will serve as an introduction to the ethical practice of dentistry through the lens of the American College of Dentists.



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Preamble

The Ethics Handbook for Dentistry serves as a compass, informing our professional conduct and decision-making, and it reflects our unwavering commitment to uphold the highest level of integrity in all our endeavors. It ensures that we adhere to the ACD core values and embody the spirit of the College in our daily practices.

As ACD Fellows and dental professionals, we wholeheartedly embrace our responsibility to prioritize our patients' and communities' health and well-being. We recognize the immense trust placed in us by the public and approach our duties with steadfast diligence and care.

At the core of our mission lie the four pillars of the ACD: **ethics, professionalism, leadership, and excellence**. These ideals guide our actions and decisions, ensuring that our patients receive optimal care and that we hold human dignity in the highest regard.

Being aware of the profound impact of our choices, we approach our responsibilities with the utmost seriousness and sincerity. Our dedication to our patients, colleagues, the dental profession, and the broader community drives us to consistently uphold the highest standards of ethical conduct. *The Ethics Handbook for Dentistry* is a foundation for ethics, professionalism, leadership, and excellence in dentistry.



Ethics



Professionalism



Leadership



Excellence

Ethics

Ethics guides interactions with others based on moral standards and is both individual and collective.

Ethics is:

Value-based.

Doing the right thing for the right reason.

An essential component of professionalism.

Distinct from legal and regulatory guidelines.

Professionalism

Professionalism relates to behavior expected of one in a learned profession.

Professionalism includes:

The intent, manner, and qualities that represent a profession or professional.

Positive habits of conduct, knowledge, perception and reasoning from professional organizations and individual professionals.

Clinical competence, communication skills, ethical understanding and action, legal understanding and compliance, altruism, accountability, empathy and humanism.

Leadership

Leadership is characterized by personal character, integrity, and commitment. Successful leadership results in working with others to achieve a common goal.

The four primary leadership roles are:

Modeling professional behavior.

Leading the dental team.

Guiding patients to improve their oral health.

Leading the wider community and health system to improve the population's oral health.

Excellence

Excellence is an overarching value that describes an oral health professional's commitment to every dimension of practice. Excellence includes intellectual excellence which obligates the provider to use the best evidence in decision making, and moral excellence which obligates the provider to place the needs and interests of their patients over their own self-interest.

Excellence is:

Commitment.

Proficiency.

Evidence-based.

Patient-centered.

Core Values

ACD CARES emphasizes the American College of Dentists' commitment to promoting compassionate and patient-centered oral healthcare, highlighting the organization's dedication to the well-being and general health of all patients, oral healthcare providers, and society.

Accountability

Competence

Dignity

Collaboration

Advocacy

Reflection

Empathy

Stewardship

These core values expand upon the ADA Principles of Ethics and Code of Conduct and are not intended to replace them.

Accountability

Accountability in dentistry pertains to both patient care and dentists' actions. Patient care involves delivering consistent, high-quality services that meet professional standards and prioritize patient well-being. Dentists are responsible for accurate diagnoses, effective treatments, and transparent communication with patients about their oral health needs and options. Striving for continuous improvement, they should self-evaluate and actively seek feedback to ensure the delivery of quality care. Regarding dentists' actions, accountability means accepting responsibility for one's decisions and behaviors.

Competence

Competence is the demonstration of knowledge, skills, and values by the dental professional that serves the best interest of each patient. Requiring a lifelong commitment to learning and self-reflection by the dental professional, competence is the just expectation of the public as part of the social contract.

Dignity

Dignity in patient care and interactions with colleagues embodies respect and appreciation for every individual's inherent value, regardless of background or circumstances. Dental providers must treat each patient with courtesy, empathy, and kindness, respecting patient autonomy in making informed decisions.

Collaboration

Collaboration is essential in the provision of dental care. Collaboration requires that the dental professional work with others, sharing information and expertise in the best interest of each patient. Collaboration with the dental team, dental specialists, and other co-professionals ensures that patients receive comprehensive care that best serves their healthcare needs.

Advocacy

Advocacy includes individual and collective activities that support justice, access, and equity through policy. Advocacy can occur at every level of professional interaction from the patient to the global level. It can result in change for a particular patient to broader systemic change to improve the health and well-being of those we serve.

Reflection

In engaging in reflection, we can continually learn from our behavior to better understand ourselves and our patients. Being reflective means not just acting but thinking about our actions before and after. In being reflective, we ask why and how we do what we do, how our actions impact others, and whether our actions result in the consequences we intend.

Empathy

A dental professional demonstrates empathy when focusing on a person's experience and responding with compassion. The empathic dental professional is aware of other people's emotions and understands their feelings. Empathy is critical for establishing trust with patients and providing care that meets their needs.

Stewardship

Stewardship in the dental profession embodies the meticulous and responsible management of patients' well-being. It reflects shared values, where the principles of ethics guide every decision and action. Dentists prioritize ensuring equal access to quality care regardless of a patient's background or socioeconomic status. Resource management is paramount, utilizing evidence-based techniques and technology efficiently to optimize patient outcomes and minimize waste. Ultimately, dental stewards are devoted to safeguarding oral health and the well-being of those they serve.

Patients and Society

Oral healthcare professionals not only contribute to the well-being of their patients, but also promote the overall health and welfare of society.

To fulfill these obligations, they must remain current concerning ethical, legal, and regulatory guidelines that require healthcare professionals to contribute to the public's safety and well-being. Federal and state requirements including dental practice acts are frequently revised. An ethical obligation exists to obtain the information, training, and/or credentials necessary to satisfy requirements. Examples may include reporting child abuse, intimate partner violence and human trafficking, integrating practices that support sustainability, appropriate use of social media, and acquiring training to respond to current public health challenges. Professional societies and peer-reviewed publications are reliable sources of information and guidance for providers.

The essence of every health profession is service above self. The dental provider's primary obligation is to provide service that is in the patient's best interest. By agreeing to participate in the provider-patient relationship, patients and providers accept certain obligations. Both accept a responsibility to disclose information pertinent to the relationship. The provider must respect patient privacy, maintain patient confidentiality, keep promises, be truthful, and respect patient values and personal preferences in treatment decisions.

The activities of the dental profession transcend the clinical setting, branching out into a dynamic network of relationships that intersect with the broader community, nonprofessional entities, and individuals. These interactions underscore the profession's commitment to providing quality oral healthcare and actively contributing to the betterment of society.

Professionals and Co-Professionals

Dentists are pivotal in coordinating and delivering care through a collaborative effort of dental team members, including but not limited to dental hygienists, dental assistants, dental laboratory technicians, and dental therapists. Simultaneously, dentists have an ethical and professional duty to engage and cooperate with other co-professionals, including dental specialists and other healthcare practitioners. Furthermore, dentists are integral components of an inter-professional team. This collaborative model facilitates the dental team's integration into a patient-centered healthcare system, characterized by effective management, communication, and cooperation with other healthcare professionals, thus ensuring comprehensive oral and general healthcare. In addition, inter-professional collaboration enhances the quality of care, patient safety, and overall effectiveness of dental treatment. Dental and non-dental professionals must respect the knowledge, skills, and expertise each provider brings to the collaborative framework. Mutual respect should be a hallmark of all interactions.

Dentists must also collaborate and share knowledge with their peers, fostering a supportive and collegial environment that promotes the collective growth of oral health and the dental profession. By fulfilling these obligations, they contribute to the integrity and advancement of the profession and enhance the overall quality of dental healthcare delivery.

Dental professionals are also human beings with needs of their own. Dental professionals need to learn fundamental skills to effectively balance their work and personal lives, manage stress and ensure that they are able to provide the best possible care to their patients.

Ethical Decision-Making

Ethical decision making may be simple or complex and a range of models can be helpful when faced with an ethical dilemma. Because of variability in stakeholders, their goals and values, settings, resources, and timing no one model is ideal. Different models may be appropriate under different circumstances. Ultimately, no matter what model is applied, an ethical decision can be achieved when one considers: what ethical principles are being challenged; whose interests are impacted and how; what the range of acceptable solutions including feasibility are; and how competing interests can be balanced. At acd.org a range of ethical decision-making models is available to provide guidance to dentists confronted with an ethical dilemma. No matter which model one applies, thoughtful consideration, honest discourse and reliance on core values most often leads to ethical resolution.

Resources

The American College of Dentists developed and manages Dental Ethics, a collection of online ethics resources and courses at dentaethics.org. There are no registration fees and the American College of Dentists is an approved AGD PACE Program Provider. Also, the *Journal of the American College of Dentists*, published continuously since 1934, is a resource for contemporary issues related to the ACD mission and oral healthcare.



The ACD Test for Ethical Decisions

prompts questions that should be considered
when faced with an ethical dilemma.



Assess

Is it true? Is it accurate?

Is it fair? Is it quality?

Is it legal?



Communicate

Have you listened?

Have you informed the patient?

Have you explained outcomes?

Have you presented alternatives or
discussed with team members?



Decide

Is now the best time?

Is it within your ability?

Is it in the best interests
of the patient?

Mission

The College's mission is to advance excellence, ethics, professionalism, and leadership in oral healthcare.

The College implements its mission by:

Upholding and modeling the highest standards of ethics in dentistry; fostering interprofessional relationships; promoting and encouraging professionals to actively engage in community service.

Supporting dental education, including continuing education, research, and the free exchange of ideas and experiences among dental professionals to improve the delivery of oral healthcare.

Encouraging qualified individuals to enter the profession of dentistry.

Growing the Fellowship of the College with individuals who have made meritorious contributions to the art and science of dentistry, education, literature, human relations, and other areas paramount to human welfare and who can further the College's objectives.

Accountability

Competence

Dignity

Collaboration

Advocacy

Reflection

Empathy

Stewardship

Acknowledgments

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Follow impulses and
leaderships that represent
ideals; that point the way to
your professional destiny;
that express integrity,
fidelity, service, and lofty
purposes—the finest that
is in you individually
and professionally!

”

William J. Gies

July 11, 1937



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