



Trust and ethical standards of care

From a global perspective, on a daily basis, patients entrust their dental health to the oral health care team. Leading the oral health care team is the dental practitioner. When a patient presents to the dental office, they allow or consent each member of the oral health care team, and more specifically the dental practitioner, to deliver advice and service to one of the most sensitive and emotional parts of the human body. Granting such trust and empowerment is truly a privilege that must be taken with the utmost seriousness, the highest of regard, and the greatest of respect. According to a 2023 Gallup poll assessing the honesty and ethical standards of various professions, dentistry is one of the professions the public permits, almost with blind faith or with close to unconditional consent, to perform procedures on a unique and extraordinary portion of the human anatomy. Dentistry was the fourth most trusted profession among the 23 professions included in the study, which involved surveying 800 American adults. The survey reported 59% of American adults believe dentistry, overall, to have very high/high honesty and ethical standards.¹

The cornerstone and foundation of the dental practitioner–patient relationship is based on trust. Trust is a central part of all human relationships involving many possible aspects, such as: a set of behaviors; acting in ways that depend on another; a belief in a probability that a person will behave in certain ways; an abstract mental attitude toward a proposition that someone is dependable; a feeling of confidence and security that a partner cares; and a complex neural process that binds diverse representations into a semantic pointer that includes emotions.²

According to the American College of Dentists,³ ethics are the moral principles or virtues that govern the character and conduct of an individual or a group. Ethics, as a branch of both philosophy and theology, is the systematic study of what is right and good with respect to character and conduct. Essentially, the purpose of ethics is to seek an answer to two fundamental questions: What should we do? And why should we do it? Specifically, dental ethics applies moral principles and virtues to the everyday practice of dentistry.

It is important to note that ethics and trust are reciprocal and mutually reinforcing. Proactive ethics is part of what it

takes to build trust while building trust is part of what is required to maintain good ethics. Ethical behavior and choices help build trust, and when trust is lost, people are less likely to uphold their ethics. If the situation arises where ethics become absent, then trust is rather elusive.

In order to assist dental practitioners in following and adhering to dental ethics and more specifically to ethical standards of conduct, the American Dental Association (ADA) created the ADA Principles of Ethics and Code of Professional Conduct (ADA Code).⁴ The ADA Code is, in effect, a written expression of the obligations arising from the implied contract between the dental profession and society. The ADA Code has three main components: the Principles of Ethics, the Code of Professional Conduct, and the Advisory Opinions. The Principles of Ethics are the aspirational goals of the profession. They provide guidance and offer justification for the Code of Professional Conduct and the Advisory Opinions. The Code of Professional Conduct is an expression of specific types of conduct that are either required or prohibited. The Advisory Opinions are interpretations that apply the Code of Professional Conduct to specific factual situations.

The foundation of the ADA Code is comprised of five fundamental principles: patient autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, justice, and veracity. Patient autonomy implies self-governance. The dental practitioner has a duty to respect the patient's rights to self-determination and confidentiality. The idea of this principle is that the dental practitioner has a duty to treat the patient according to the patient's desires, within the bounds of accepted treatment, and to protect the patient's confidentiality. Respect for patient autonomy affirms this dynamic in the dental practitioner–patient relationship and forms the foundation for informed consent, for protecting patient confidentiality, and for upholding veracity. Nonmaleficence, which simplistically is do no harm to others, implies that a dental practitioner has a duty to refrain from harming the patient. It is the dental practitioner's obligation to keep knowledge and skills current, knowing one's own limitations and when to refer to a specialist or other professional, and knowing when and under what circumstances delegation of patient care

to auxiliaries is appropriate. Beneficence or do good to others is the act whereby the dental practitioner has the duty to promote the patient's welfare with an obligation to service the patient and the public-at-large. Ethically, the dental practitioner must take into consideration and account for the needs, desires, and values of the patient regardless of the dental practitioner's practice arrangement. Justice, often considered to equate to fairness or giving to each his or her own due, is the concept whereby the dental practitioner has a duty to treat people fairly, without bias or prejudice, and includes being fair in dealing with patients, colleagues, and society. Principle veracity akin to truthfulness, honesty, or truth-telling promotes the idea that the dental practitioner engages in communicating in a truthful manner by respecting the position of trust inherent in the dental practitioner–patient relationship, communicating truthfully and without deception, and maintaining intellectual integrity.

Acknowledging and embracing these ideals of trust and ethical standards of care into professional daily activities will only result in the promotion and enhancement of the dental practitioner–patient relationship and, ultimately, improved care. Following these principles, which should be taught and discussed early on in dental education (embedded into current dental curricula) and continued throughout the lifetime of a dental practitioner, will serve the profession well, allowing us to be held in the highest esteem with the utmost of respect from the public we have the honor to serve.

References

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