

Simplified dental ethics for the students and dental care providers

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ABSTRACT

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Oral health is an integral part of general health and overall well being of an individual. The practice of dentistry is distinct and different from general medical practitioners. Similar to the code of medical ethics which all doctors are entitled to abide, the dentists' in particular too have to follow the Code of Dental Ethics. Dentists have to continuously update themselves with continuous dental educational programs as dental science is progressing at a rapid rate. They need to understand and recognize the minimum standard of care which is an ever - evolving dynamic entity. Dental professionals have to constantly update the laws and legalities proposed by the governing bodies of the land, provide quality dental care to their patients and protect themselves from legal issues such as medical negligence, malpractice or from fraudulent claims of the patients.

Keywords: Dental ethics, Standard of care, Code of ethics, Dental law, Quality dental care, Medical negligence, Malpractice

INTRODUCTION

As the adage suggests - mouth is the gateway of the body, Dentists are health care providers who play a vital role in society; taking care of one's smile, dental function and esthetics. The dentist makes a commitment to the society that he will uphold the realms of the dental profession, follow and adhere to high ethical standards of care and conduct, will be service - oriented and work towards a goal of providing dental care with equity. This continued service creates a sense of trust in the population over a period of time.

The Code of ethics is an evolving document which came into force as The Dentist's Code of Ethics regulation August 1976 and was recently revised in 2014, published in the Gazette of India, Extraordinary, Section-4 by The Dental Council of India¹. This ethical code provides the basic conduct of a professional towards his patients', towards his fellow dentists' and towards the society in large. This dynamic code is primarily formulated to aid the dentists a basic guideline to follow, keeping in mind the needs and interests of the dentists and their patients.

The code of ethics is formed by the five fundamental principles: patient autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, justice and veracity². These principles are inter-connected and a balance of these forms the basic guidelines for any professional. Such code of ethics is binding on all members of the dental profession such as dental students, practicing dentists and organisations which patronize dentistry. Ethics provides a scaffold on which the student can build professionalism and camaraderie amongst his peer in dentistry. Any violations of the law can however result in disciplinary action.

The role of dental institutions in promotion of ethics

- ◆ Dental institutions should take proactive roles in tackling ethical concerns within the formative stages of the dental students.

- ◆ They should include ethics in their curriculum and give primary importance during the academic trainings.
- ◆ The three cornerstones of academic dentistry include education, research and patient care. This has to be upheld for the promotion of health care and be beneficial to the patients.
- ◆ A holistic approach is essential for imparting high - standard of dental education to be on par with International standards.
- ◆ They should promote students' lifelong commitment to ethical behavior to benefit patients and the dental profession.
- ◆ The institutions should ensure that patient care is delivered irrespective of social status, caste, creed, religion or medical status of the patient.
- ◆ Maintenance of accurate patient clinical records with proper past/present family, medical and dental history is absolutely necessary. Such data can be used for statistical purposes to study the possible effects of dental well-being and take measurable cautious action towards prevention of dental diseases.

The role of dental students in promotion of ethics

- ◆ Dental students should train during their clinical years and internship with a competency to provide humane and compassionate care to all patients.
- ◆ They should develop clinical skills through handling patients and reason their diagnosis with the acquired academic knowledge during their student tenure.
- ◆ They should be encouraged to question, reason and be self-critical to induce curiosity and foster intellectual skills necessary for future research in dental science. This will further be stepping stone towards newer science and technology development.
- ◆ They should respect their co-students' opinions without prejudice, defend their rights, encourage interpersonal relationship and promote team spirit.
- ◆ They should show shared or collaborative leadership with an emphasis on working as a team and sharing

- ◆ leadership functions.
- ◆ Proper knowledge and understanding of patients' rights particularly related to confidentiality and informed consent should be iterated.
- ◆ They should know that patient is the center of care and all interactions including history taking, clinical examination, investigations, diagnosis, treatment planning and treatment, must have the patient's best interest as the focus.
- ◆ They should establish a good patient–dentist relationship for effective delivery of dental treatment.
- ◆ They should follow code of ethics and understand their role as an individual to prevent, promote and be providers of comprehensive community dental care.

The role of practicing dentists in promotion of ethics

- ◆ Dentists have to create and increase awareness amongst the population and aid in prevention of dental diseases like dental caries and periodontal problems.
- ◆ Quality uncompromised treatment should be provided with concessional or reasonable rates to the under privileged.
- ◆ All patients should be treated equally and not discriminated on basis of gender, sexual orientation, age, medical status, presence of infectious diseases and / or patients with special needs.
- ◆ The dental etiquette within ones' practice should include a warm welcome by the supporting staff, a pleasant working atmosphere amongst the team members, rational deliverance of dental care and excellent customer service. This would result in maximum symbiotic long-term and ingrained benefit to both the dentist and patient.
- ◆ Universal standards of infection control, sterilization and disinfection, and waste management practices should be followed diligently³.
- ◆ Dentists should identify patients' expectations⁴ and provide adequate guidance before the commencement of the treatment especially in esthetic cases.
- ◆ Good and effective communication can bring benefits to a practice, improving patient and staff retention, interest and expectations.
- ◆ Trust is developed and nurtured through competence, reliability, politeness, empathy, promptness of work and ability to win patients' through continuous programming and delivery of these intangibles.
- ◆ They should identify the patterns and trends of orodental diseases with lifestyle changes in diet, habits like smoking, drinking, drug and substance abuse. They should motivate public regarding dental health, generate awareness within community, encourage abstinence of such habits and realize their social and moral responsibilities.
- ◆ Maintenance of accurate patient records such as case sheets, dental models, profile and intra-oral pictures and radiographs for a minimum period of 3 years is important. Soft copy preservation of such records is encouraged thereafter.

- ◆ Importance of emergency care for victims especially in cases of physical abuse, neglect, mass disasters and other cases of medicolegal and forensic interest should be dealt with compassion.
- ◆ Dentists must excel in the care – cure standard of treatment and serve as role models for the next generation by providing effective supervision and mentoring for learners.
- ◆ They should work as great administrators, promote effective staff management, conduct continuous internal meetings within their practice, note grievances amongst their staff, and reward appraisals.
- ◆ Traditionally advertising^{5,6} of one's practice was predominantly only by word of mouth and goodwill from the patients. This created a sense of bond and strengthened the dentist – patient relationship.
- ◆ However in modern times subtle advertisements is encouraged to showcase and highlight the uniqueness of one's practice, starting of a new practice, change of ownership through print media and marketing. The dichotomy between the dual role of the dental practitioner as a health care provider and businessman is the crux of advertising. The practitioner has to balance between these two entities to be successful professionally and financially⁷.
- ◆ The use of internal marketing⁸⁻¹¹ tools such as practice brochures, thank you notes for referral, birthday and anniversary wishes, appointment reminders, direct mails to patients about the clinic's progress and up-gradation of technology can further build a loyal base of patients for a successful practice. This increases the credibility of the doctor and the practice.

Standard of care is the core entity to provide quality dental care and promote excellence in dentistry. It is a unique dynamic component as medical science, treatment plan, modern high technology and equipments are constantly evolving on a day to day basis. A doctor had to be abreast with such evolving science and raise the bar of care.

Consumer Protection Act 1995 included medical treatment within the purview of the act, thus emphasizing on medical negligence. All health care providers were liable for negligence¹² which could be classified as civil or criminal¹³. Civil negligence included cases exhibiting simple cases of faulty care or lack of skill and is usually tried in civil courts where the defaulter was liable to pay compensation. However criminal negligence included cases exhibiting gross absence of care or skill and is usually tried in criminal courts where the defaulter is fined or imprisoned. In India, Section 304-A of Indian Penal Code (IPC) is the provision under which a patient can register a case of criminal medical negligence. Under section 88 of the act, the doctor cannot be accused of an offence if he performs a treatment in an act of good faith for the patients benefit, does not intend to cause harm or risk, the patient has been completely explained about the procedure and given consent for the same.

Complaints of medical negligence have to be supported by expert testimony. Expert opinion is an opinion of a person / witness who possesses specialized skill or knowledge in a particular field and his opinion is based on scientific factors of the case using reasonable probability after an examination of the case facts. Hence after proper considerations the case is dealt with in the court of law.

CONCLUSION

Medicine and Dentistry are primarily health professions and not a business. Hence ethical considerations of a practice should be paramount, towards the interests of the patients' and society in large. This paradigm shift towards service would prevent the escalation of medicolegal cases in the future.

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Dr. Vidya Hari Iyer completed her BDS from Ragas Dental College and Hospital in 1995 and graduated from **Symbiosis Center for Health Care in Medicolegal Systems** in 2002 with distinction. She has authored a **textbook "Dental Ethics and Medicolegal issues"** published by Jaypee Publications and authored a chapter "Medicolegal issues related to Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery". She has a number of national articles to her credit namely "**Improve your communication skills - medicolegal perspective**", "**How to prevent a litigation - a doctor's perspective**". She has lectured widely on Medical and Dental Ethics and Jurisprudence both in State and National symposiums and conferences namely IMPAI, IMA and IDA.

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