

The moral compass of a dental practitioner: A balancing act between ethical principles, moral values, and professionalism

Johan Hartshorne¹

Keywords: Ethical principles, moral values, moral beliefs, moral behaviour, moral compass, professional conduct, professionalism, dental healthcare workers, dental practitioner.

Executive summary

Importance

- A moral compass is the foundation of professional practice that upholds the dignity and integrity of dental practitioners, fosters trust between patients and practitioners, is vital to successful patient outcomes, and the overall reputation of the dental profession.

Key points

- The core elements of ethics, moral values and professionalism are complimentary to each other guiding how dental professionals should interact with patients and peers, make indecisions and behave.
- Continuously self-reflecting upon our personal values and beliefs, ethical principles and professional conduct is a professional responsibility that we all share.

Practice implications

- Commitment to life-long learning and continuing professional development to strengthen clinical competencies, advance communication skills, enhance professional judgment, and to continuously improve of quality of care.

Background

In modern dentistry dental practitioners frequently encounter ethical dilemmas that challenge their integrity, judgements, and decision-making.¹ These dilemmas often arise from lack of communication, patient non-compliance, commercial or business pressures, and the rapid integration of new technologies.¹

Navigating and resolving these ethical challenges demands a deep understanding of ethical principles, moral values, and professionalism, coupled with practical strategies for decision-making, to balance patient desires with professional conduct that will uphold patient safety and well-being, trust, professional integrity, and the highest standards of care.

Ethical principles, moral values and professionalism, collectively referred to as a 'moral compass', are cornerstone elements upon which dentist-patient relationships

¹ Johan Hartshorne

B.Sc., B.Ch.D., M.Ch.D., M.P.A.,
Ph.D. (Stell), FFPH.RCP (UK)

General Dental Practitioner

Intercare Medical and Dental
Centre, Tyger Valley, Bellville,
South Africa, 7530

Email: johan.laptop@intercare.co.za

and a successful dental practice is built.² A moral compass is defined as: “a natural feeling that makes people know what is right and wrong and how they should behave”³, or “a set of beliefs or values that help guide ethical decisions, judgments, and behaviour”.⁴

Whilst we often feel we have an innate understanding of the concepts of ethics, moral belief and professionalism, there is no single clear definition as to what they really mean in dentistry. Furthermore, most people use the terms ethics, morals and professionalism synonymously and interchangeably to help explain the differences between right and wrong.⁵⁻⁷ The definitions of ethics, moral values, and professionalism however, are slightly more complicated with subtle differences between the three concepts. Moreover, in our busy professional lives, many of us do not spend a great deal of time reflecting upon ethical principles, moral values, and professionalism, why we hold them, and where they come from. Nor do we consciously refer to them when difficult decisions need to be made.⁸ As members of the dental profession, we all share a professional responsibility to reflect upon our ethical principles, our own moral values and professional conduct (behaviour) in our personal and professional domain. These core elements serve as the key pillars for establishing trust and integrity within the dentist-patient relationship and the broader dental community.

Purpose

This article aims to explore the core elements of a dental practitioners’ moral compass, the key differences between the concepts of ethical principles, moral values and professionalism, and to provide some clarity and understanding on their role and best practices in guiding ethical decision-making, judgements, and professional conduct that will not only honour the dignity, rights, and well-being of patients, but also create a positive and healthy practice culture, and ensure the integrity of the profession.

Ethical principles

The fundamental ethical principles that govern dental practice: autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, justice⁹ and veracity,¹⁰⁻¹² are a core element of a dental practitioners moral compass. (Table 1) Ethical principles are guiding principles, or a set of rules of conduct, or correct behaviour, in a particular institution or professional group such as the dental community.^{6,8,13} It deals with the key aspects of human behaviour and decision making of what is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, ‘good’ or ‘bad’, ‘just’ or ‘unjust’.¹¹ Ethical principles are a fundamental cornerstone of professional practice that

upholds the dignity of the dental profession and fosters trust between patients and practitioners.^{1,2}

Upholding ethical principles in dentistry is crucial for a practice’s compliance, reputation, and overall success. Failing to uphold these principles could leave your dental practice liable for mistakes, leading to malpractice claims and a serious hit to your personal and professional reputation. The Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) (Dental Councils and Dental Boards) have the power to suspend or remove a dentist’s registration, even when no law has been broken. Professional ethics and conduct is therefore highly enforceable because the dentist’s registration is at stake. From this you will deduce that ethical behaviour is mandatory for a career in dentistry and not voluntary.⁸ The characteristics of ethical principles are summarized in Table 1.

Patient autonomy

Autonomy in dentistry refers to respecting the patient’s right to self-determination, enabling them to make informed decisions and choices about their treatment that are aligned with their values, preferences and ability to afford treatment. Patients today are well-informed about health, treatments, and their rights as patients, and want to participate in the decision-making process. It is the foundational ethical principle on which informed consent and confidentiality is based, and ensuring trust in the dentist-patient relationship.¹ Respecting autonomy also includes the right for a patient to assess all the information provided by the professional, yet still make a choice that is not the one most valued by the professional – informed refusal. Both informed consent and confidentiality are not merely about adhering to legal standards but are integral to respecting individual rights and maintaining the dignity of the therapeutic relationship.¹

Autonomy is a crucial aspect of healthcare. It ensures that a medical, dental or any procedure in healthcare cannot proceed unless it represents the patient’s wishes. Furthermore, the patient should not have any undue influence on their decision making process, thus a patient’s decision must be free of manipulation, coercion and deceit.¹⁴

Best practice guidelines that will support patient autonomy:

- Actively listen to patients’ needs, preferences, and concerns and engage in patient-centered communication, answering questions thoroughly.
- Clearly lay out the treatment options without giving preference to the most profitable options.

Table 1: A synopsis of the core concepts and characteristics of a dentist's moral compass

CORE CONCEPTS	ETHICAL PRINCIPLES	MORAL VALUES/BELIEFS	PROFESSIONALISM
DEFINITION	Guiding normative standard of principles, or set of rules of conduct, or correct behaviour, in a particular institution of professional group. Principles are an objective reality that is not bound by cultures and individuals	Principles or habits relating to right or wrong conduct based on an individual's own compass or beliefs of right or wrong, or good or bad. (Personal values) Moral values guide consequential attitudes and actions of how people think, feel and behave. Values are internal, subjective and flexible.	A set of values, behaviours, habits, and relationships that underpin the trust the public has in doctors. Professionalism is the behaviour by which we demonstrate that we are worthy of the trust bestowed upon us by the public, because we are working for the public good. Upholding the highest standards of ethical conduct, integrity, respect and accountability.
CORE ELEMENTS (Best practice guidelines)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Autonomy- right to self-determination Beneficence- patients best interest Non-maleficence – do no harm Justice – fairness and accountability Veracity - Being truthful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Honesty / Trustworthiness Respect / Self-respect Humility Reliability Accountability Loyalty Caring /Kindness/Generosity Thoughtfulness Selflessness / altruism Compassion Gratitude Self-awareness Self-discipline Self-reflection Self-improvement Open minded / cognitive flexibility Tolerance Frugality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrity Excellence Selflessness / Advocacy/ Altruism Competence/Skilfulness Continuing professional development / Self-improvement Self-awareness / Knowledge of limits Appearance Compassion/empathy Trustworthiness Accountability/Responsibility Respect for others Generosity Assertiveness Being honest Communication/Collaboration / Cooperation/Teamwork/Transparency
ETYMOLOGICAL ORIGIN	'Ethos' meaning character	'Mos' meaning customs or beliefs	'Professio' meaning public acknowledgment
FRAMED OR GOVERNED BY	Determined by professional or legal norms (external source)	Self-determined and influenced by societal and cultural norms (Internal belief system)	Decided and governed by society, and professional organisations.
DEALS WITH	Principles of what is deemed as right or wrong conduct / behaviour.	Moral values are personal beliefs of what is deemed as right or wrong behaviour.	Refers to the way in which professionals conduct themselves, the attitudes they convey, and the ways they communicate with their patients, colleagues and staff.
CONSISTENCY	Ethical principles remain consistent across professions, industries and institutions. Principles are universal and constant in nature.	Values and beliefs are personal and differ across society and cultures – varies from individual to individual	Professionalism involves consistently upholding high standards of professional conduct. It needs to be earned, practiced and improved every day. This trait will vary between individuals.

- Discuss the potential benefits and risks of treatments, allowing patients to weigh their choices thoughtfully.
- Ensure that patients understand the individual stages of atreatment and the cost thereof.
- Obtain informed consent, documenting the patient's

agreement to the chosen treatment plan.

Beneficence

The principle of 'beneficence' refers to 'doing good' and promoting patient well-being.⁹ Dental practitioners, based on

their acquired body of knowledge and skills, requires taking all appropriate actions, and use all reasonable means, that will produce good consequences that benefit the patient.¹⁵ It also refers to prioritizing patient welfare to maximize the benefits they receive and to provide a high standard of care that is in the patients' best interest, even when the interests of the latter conflict with the practitioner's personal self-interest. The needs and interests of the patient always take precedence over the practitioners own interests.¹⁶ The "best interests" of patients means that professional decisions by the dentist must consider patients' values and personal preferences.¹² This requires that dentists carefully listen to, and communicate with their patients. Patients must be informed of preferred and alternative treatment options, with benefits, risks and costs of each option. Together, the risks, benefits, and burdens can be balanced. It is only after such consideration that the "best interests" of patients can be assured.¹²

Unlike medicine, dentistry has increasingly become viewed as a business, as over the last decade there has been a focus on commercialization of dentist services and the rise of "corporate dentistry"^{17,18} Although lip service is paid to putting the clients' needs first in the business world, it is generally accepted that the needs of the patient should always take precedence over self-interest, or the financial priorities of the practice.¹⁶

Best practice guidelines for 'doing good' and serving the patients' best interest:

- Take time to thoroughly assess a patient's condition and determine the best treatment option.
- Providing treatment recommendations tailored to each patient's needs, demands, and preferences.
- Staying attuned to patients' emotional and physical concerns and offer solutions to ease their physical and emotional anxieties.
- Maintain up-to-date knowledge of the latest dental advancements and evidence-based practices to provide the best treatment options for patients.
- Regularly assess treatment progress to ensure positive and satisfactory patient outcomes.
- Be attentive to patients' pain and discomfort, providing timely pain relief and follow-up care.

Non-maleficence (Do no Harm)

The principle of non-maleficence obligates us to refrain from actions or treatments that could cause harm to patients.^{9,14} The principle on non-maleficence means avoid harming

a patient intentionally or unintentionally by weighing the risks of a treatment against the benefits, and choosing the treatment that poses the most benefits to the patient. Both intentional or unintentional harm to patients can apply to laws of negligence. Intentionally imposing unreasonable risks of harm, or unintentionally causing harm to a patient due to carelessness.¹⁴ Patients who seek dental services place themselves in the care of another person and, at a minimum, should expect that no additional harm will result from that act. The patient grants the clinician the privilege of access to a portion of his or her body for an explicit purpose, a privilege founded in trust. Fundamental to that trust is that the health care provider will do no harm to the patient.¹⁵

Over time, non-maleficence has evolved to include preventing and removing harm. Therefore, healthcare providers have an obligation to 'do no harm' as well as to 'prevent harm'. Prevention of harm clearly is a domain of dentists and dental hygienists as great emphasis is placed on educating patients about preventing dental caries and periodontal disease.¹⁵

Through the implementation of recommended strategies and best practices, cultivate a patient safety culture, enhance communication, mitigate risks and continually improve patient safety outcomes. The dissemination of knowledge and the active involvement of all stakeholders are crucial for promoting patient safety and establishing a safe dental healthcare system.

Nonmaleficence and beneficence are complementary principles where dentists commit to causing no harm and actively work for the patient's benefit, respectively.²

Best practice guidelines for avoiding harm to patients:

- Collect all personal demographic, behavioural, medical and dental history to identify potential risks and contraindications, and to mitigate the risks of treatment.
- Carefully assess the risks and benefits of treatments and take necessary precautions to prevent harm during procedures.
- Promote and prioritize patient safety by following adequate safety and infection control protocols during procedures to prevent harm.
- Participate in continuing education to improve safety measures for patients.
- Employ the latest safety protocols and equipment during dental procedures to minimize risks.
- Continuously improving knowledge and skills through

ongoing education to enhance patient safety and effective care.

- **Justice (Fairness)**

The principle of justice means treating all patients 'equally', 'impartial', 'fair' and in a 'just' manner, regardless of their race, class, background, financial situation, or other diversifying factors.^{2,9} Dentists should avoid discrimination and ensure that all patients receive appropriate standard of care regardless of their emotional, personal, family and cultural background or financial status.

Fundamental to the principle of justice is an effort to treat people who have similar needs in a similar or identical manner. For example, all patients who seek treatment for the prevention of periodontal disease should receive the same level of care and attention from the dentist or dental hygienist regardless of personal or social characteristics.¹⁵ This principle is built on the profession's social contract; it pursues the profession's commitment to seek the common good, dignified existence, and the establishment of fairness, equity and justice.

Best practice guidelines to ensure fairness of treatment to all patients:

- Giving patients the same amount of time for similar appointments.
- Treat all patients with respect, regardless of their age, gender, ethnicity, cultural, religious or socioeconomic status.
- Make accommodations as necessary for patients with different cultural backgrounds or disabilities.
- It is unethical for a dental professional to recommend or refer treatment to a specialist that is unnecessary, or recommending a product to a patient for own benefit.
- Ensure that the allocation of appointments and treatment availability is fair and not influenced by personal biases.
- Be mindful of the cultural backgrounds of patients, adapting care to accommodate individual needs and preferences.
- Participate in community outreach programs or pro bono initiatives to provide dental care to the needy, disadvantaged and underserved populations.

Veracity

Veracity is defined as being honest, telling the truth and respecting the trust that is the bedrock in the dentist-patient relationship. The dentist relies on the honesty of the patient to

gather the information necessary to form a proper diagnosis. The patient relies on the dentist to be truthful so that truly informed decision-making can occur. Honesty in dealing with the public, colleagues, and self are equally important.¹² It involves truthful communication without deception and maintaining intellectual integrity. Dentists should regard truth and truthfulness as the basis of trust in their professional relationships with their patients, staff, colleagues, dental technicians and other health care providers.

Patients are expected to be truthful about their medical history, treatment expectations, and other relevant facts. Clinicians, for their part, must be truthful about the diagnosis, treatment options, benefits and disadvantages of each treatment option, cost of treatment, and the longevity afforded by the various treatment options. This allows patients to use their autonomy to make decisions in their own best interest.¹⁹ The obligation of veracity, is based on respect for patients autonomy, is acknowledged in most codes of ethics.¹⁰⁻¹²

Guidelines for ethical decision-making

The process of ethical decision making involves assessing, judging, deciding and choosing. Ethical decision-making require that all decisions, choices and actions by dentists, demonstrate: (i) regard for self-determination (respect for autonomy); (ii) the reduction and avoidance of doing harm (nonmaleficence); (iii) the promotion of well-being and the patients best interest (beneficence); and (iv) fairness in the distribution of services and goods (justice).^{10,11,12} Various approaches for ethical decision in the dental practice setting have been summarized in Dental Professional Codes of Conduct.¹⁰⁻¹²

Moral values

Moral values refer to the personal beliefs, values, and upbringing that shape an individual's behaviour and decision-making in distinguishing right from wrong, good from bad, and acceptable from unacceptable behaviour.^{5,6,13} Core moral values are a person's most central ideas or beliefs about themselves, others and the world through which every situation and life experience is seen, and guide consequential attitudes and actions of how they think, feel and behave in their personal and professional lives. In order to create honest, credible, and fair judgments and relationships with patients, clients, colleagues, staff and friends in daily life, the awareness of one's morals - along with self-awareness - is crucial. A person's moral values are often influenced by factors such as culture, religion, upbringing, family traditions,

and personal experiences.²⁰

The core elements and characteristics of moral values associated with a strong moral compass or high moral character are summarized in Table 1: ^{11,12,20}

Best practice guidelines include:

- Honesty (Being truthful, transparent and trustworthy in interactions)
- Respect (Respect all people regardless of their age, religion, cultural, social or economic background, nationality, beliefs, or point of view.)
- Reliability/Dependability (Keeping your word)
- Loyalty (Being faithful and supportive to patients and people in your life)
- Humility (Not being arrogant)
- Compassion / Caring / Kindness (Showing empathy, being kind, showing concern, and giving support towards others)
- Thoughtfulness (Being considerate towards other people)
- Self-reflection (Deep thinking, introspection and self-improvement)
- Self-improvement (Pursuit of knowledge, personal growth and to better yourself)
- Gratitude (Gratitude is the willingness to express appreciation for what you have, and never take anybody - or anything - for granted.)
- Self-respect and Self-awareness (Caring about yourself, being happy, and health and wellness)
- Adaptability (Ability to adjust to changes)
- Open-mindedness/ cognitive flexibility (Open to new perspectives, creativity)
- Frugality (Spending money carefully)
- Generosity (Willingness to offer time, money, support, and kindness)
- Community (Belonging to a group)
- Tolerance (Ability or willingness to tolerate the existence, opinions, dislikes or disagreements of others)

Professionalism

Professionalism signifies a set of values, behaviours, conduct and relationships of how we ought to act, that mirrors a dentist's approach to clinical practice, and underpins the trust the public has in professionals.^{8,12,21-27} Professionalism has been viewed as that quality of conduct and character that accompanies the use of superior knowledge, skills, judgment, and experience to the benefit of a patient,

prior to any consideration of self-interest.¹² The **Merriam-Webster** dictionary defines professionalism as *"the conduct, aims, or qualities that characterize or mark a profession or a professional person"*; and it defines a profession as *"a calling requiring specialized knowledge and often long and intensive academic preparation."*⁴

The core elements, characteristics and traits of professionalism^{26,28} will vary between professionals depending on a person's personal values, behaviour and conduct, including that of others' individuals', (i.e.: colleagues, supervisors, patients, public), as well as institutional, professional organizations, and societal expectations how professionals should conduct themselves.²⁹ Contemporary professionalism in a culturally diverse society has moved beyond personal virtue to a collective commitment to patients, the public, and their health.³⁰ It is about demonstrating the values of the profession. *"A professional person must have a sense of responsibility and a degree of self-control regarding personal behaviour. Doing what is right - when the law requires it, as well as for ethical or moral reasons - should be a matter of personal pride for the professional person."*³¹ Professionalism conflicts can arise when expectations and assumptions of behaviour differ during an interaction and/or situation with. *"Professionalism is simply about choices, and making the right ones, for the right reasons, no matter what stage in your professional career these decisions arise."*³²

The core elements and characteristics of professionalism associated with a strong moral compass or high moral character are summarized in Table 1. ^{26,28} The core elements of professionalism are complimentary to ethical principles and moral values, guiding how dental professionals should interact with patients and conduct their business practices. Professionalism is a characteristic that needs to be earned, practiced and improved every day.

Best practice guidelines for Professionalism Communication

- Assertiveness (Communicate in a confident manner.)
- Being honest (Speaking and acting truthfully - telling the truth, keeping one's word, or able to be trusted/ adherence to the facts, and being forthright in interactions with patients, and peers.³²)
- Transparency (Being open, upfront, and honest in communications relating to treatments, their benefits and limitations, errors, costs and billing practices. ^{1,33})
- Collaboration/Cooperation/Teamwork (Working together

and communicating effectively with patients, and colleagues to achieve a common goal - the patients best interest.³³⁾

Capacity to Consent

Mental health conditions can sometimes impair cognitive function, making it difficult for patients to make informed decisions. It is therefore essential that DHCP assess the patient's capacity to understand and consent to treatment. If a patient lacks the capacity to consent, DHCP may need to involve legal guardians or healthcare proxies in the decision-making process while ensuring that the patient's best interests are prioritized.

Attitudes

- Trustworthiness (Being reliable, dependable and credible is considered the "cornerstone of the doctor-patient relationship".³⁴⁾
- Compassion (Listening attentively and showing empathy and kindness towards concerns of patients.)
- Accountability (Accepting responsibility and to be held accountable for your actions and mistakes, and to avoid letting self-interest override the patient's interest.^{33,35)} Hold yourself to the same clinical, moral and legal standards as others.)
- Respect (Treating others with respect and dignity - It's fundamental to ensuring that the care provided is not only effective, but also respectful and considerate of patients' rights for example privacy and confidentiality, and well-being.)
- Generosity (With time and kindness)

Conduct

- Integrity (Consistently doing the right thing – being committed to upholding the profession's Codes of Ethics, and to safeguard, influence, and promote the highest professional standards,^{4,12,32)} obeying laws and complying with regulations.³⁴⁾
- Excellence (Dedication and striving to achieve the highest standards of care through self-reflection, and continual self-improvement.^{3,33)}
- Selflessness / Advocacy (altruism) (Putting the interests of one's patients over one's own interest.³³⁾
- Competence and Skilfulness (Achieving and maintaining a combination of knowledge, skills and experience that meets the requirement of appropriateness and acceptable standard, effectively and successfully.³⁶⁾ Maintaining competence requires continual self-

assessment about the outcome of patient care, and involves a commitment to lifelong learning.^{12,33)}

- Continuing professional development (Life-long pursuit of, and a commitment to improvement of professional knowledge and skills²⁴⁾, to strengthen clinical competencies, advance communication skills, enhance professional judgment, and to continuously improve quality of care (excellence), through self-reflection and continuing education activities.^{24,28,33)} CPD compliance is mandatory by law, for all health practitioners registered with the HPCSA to ensure quality and good health care provision, and protection of the public.
- Self-awareness (Knowledge of professional abilities and limitations - This includes recognition of the need for guidance or supervision, or referral to a specialist, when faced with complexed cases.)
- Appearance and behaviour (Presenting and behaving yourself in a professional manner - maintaining appropriate workplace hygiene, appearance, clothing, speaking,¹⁶⁾ being law-abiding, and of good character.³¹⁾

Conclusions

Dentistry is a recognised profession, however, at the same time it is a business, whereby dentists employ their skills to earn a living. There is a potential conflict of interest between these two aspects of dentistry and maintaining an appropriate balance between patient, professional, and business interests. Resolving these conflicts demands a deep understanding of ethical principles, moral values and professionalism, coupled with practical strategies for ethical decision-making.

In a world where medical ethics are more scrutinized than ever, maintaining high ethical, moral and professional standards, thus upholding a strong moral compass, is indispensable for the success and sustainability of a dental practice. It is these standards that reassure patients of their safety and quality of care, building a foundation of trust and respect that is crucial to the therapeutic relationship between patient and dental practitioner.

Ethical principles, moral values and professionalism are complimentary to each other, guiding dental practitioners how to make ethical decisions and judgements, how to interact with patients and other individuals involved in daily practice, and how they ought to behave and conduct their clinical and business practices. The primary purpose of a moral compass, is to guide dental practitioners in providing

compassionate, effective, and ethical care. Upholding a strong moral compass not only upholds the integrity, trustworthiness, and competency of dental practitioners, but also fosters trust, respect, and compassion in doctor-patient relationships.

By upholding ethical principles, moral values and professionalism, dentists not only contribute to the health and well-being of their patients but also enhance the reputation and integrity of the dental profession and its status in society. Furthermore, a strong moral compass can lead to greater self-worth, increased happiness, better relationships, and greater success in practice and in life.

One's moral compass may change as we face new experiences in life, exposed to new technologies, gain knowledge, or cope with business hardships. Therefore, everyone's moral compass is unique and dynamic. This commitment to ethical excellence, moral values, and professionalism is not static but an ongoing process of growth and adaptation to new technologies, treatments, and societal expectations. Thus, continuously reflecting upon our personal values and beliefs, ethical principles and professional conduct is a professional responsibility that we all share. Dental practitioners are thus obligated to engage in continual professional development and to rigorously apply the ethical principles and professional standards that are at the heart of their practice. As professional people we must remain accountable not only for our adherence to the law but also for the ethical principles, moral values and professional behaviour that characterise our approach to dentistry and to the professional standards that we aspire to. Those practitioners whose attitudes, actions, and or conduct fall below the expected standard, dishonour not only themselves, but the profession as a whole.

References

The full list of References 1-39 is available in the References document