

Duties, responsibilities and obligations to patients, colleagues, society, and self

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Keywords: Duties, obligations, responsibilities, rights, ethics, legal, dental practitioners, self-care, social responsibilities, patient care, public health, professional responsibilities.

Executive summary

Importance

This review explores the ethical, moral and legal duties that dental practitioners have in four key areas: to patients, society, colleagues (and the profession), and themselves.

Key points

- A dental practitioner's primary professional duty is to serve the patients best interests and well-being.
- Open communication where patients feel heard and understood is crucial.
- Involve patients in the treatment planning process and respect their choices.
- Be upfront about the cost, benefits and limitations of treatments.
- Protect the confidentiality and privacy of patients' information.
- Engage in continuous professional development to enhance knowledge and skills and to stay current with advancements in best dental practices and technologies.
- Consult and cooperate with other members of the dental team or healthcare professionals to promote patients best interests.
- Uphold an appropriate standard of conduct to maintain the public's trust and confidence and to protect the good reputation of the profession

Practice implications

- Informed consent and confidentiality are foundational elements of ethical dental practice, and ensuring trust in the dentist-patient relationship.
- You must hold appropriate professional indemnity cover (insurance).
- Discuss fees and provide written estimates beforehand.
- Regular self-assessment and reflecting on ones practice, continually striving for personal and professional growth.
- Engage in lifelong learning, staying current with advancements in technology, techniques, and best practices.
- Prioritizing self-care to avoid burnout and to preserve mental well-being.

Background

"Being registered under the Health Professions Act No. 56 of 1974, gives healthcare

practitioners certain authority and privileges. In return, they have a duty to meet the standards of competence, care and conduct set by the health professions Council of South Africa and its Professional Boards.”¹ A dental practitioner’s primary professional duty is to “regard concern for the best interests or well-being of their patients”² However, the importance of their obligations, duties, and responsibilities extends beyond the patient and technical aspects of dental care, and touches on broader ethical, legal, social, professional, institutional, and personal dimensions relating to patients, public, peers and self-care.

The terms ‘obligations’, ‘duties’, and ‘responsibilities’, are words frequently used interchangeably in everyday language because they refer to commitments or tasks that individuals are expected to fulfil.³ In certain contexts, especially within legal and philosophical discussions, there can be subtle distinctions and nuances between the three terms.³ Obligations are legally or ethically mandated actions or requirements that must be followed. A duty on the other hand is often more general and broader in scope than an obligation, and comes from a sense of morality or ethical principles which guide an individual to perform a particular task, function, or action that is considered right. Responsibilities encompass a broader accountability, not just for performing tasks, but also for ensuring quality care, patient safety, accurate diagnoses, maintaining hygiene standards, and promoting oral health education. In this review the terms ‘duty’, ‘obligation’ and ‘responsibility’ will be used synonymously referring to the ethical, moral and legal duties that dental practitioners have toward their patients, colleagues, profession, society and themselves. Maintaining these duties has become increasingly important as dentists in many countries are experiencing great frustration in practising their profession, whether because of limited resources, increased competition and business pressures, government and/or corporate micro-management of health care delivery, rapid integration of new technologies, sensationalist media reports of dental errors and unethical conduct, or challenges to their authority and skills by patients and other health care providers.⁴ The constant change affecting both the dental profession and the public necessitates regular evaluation and reflection of professional duties of dentists and the rights of patients in meeting the challenges in the future.⁵

Purpose

This review explores the ethical, moral and legal duties that dental practitioners have in four key areas: to

patients, society, colleagues (and the profession), and themselves. Understanding the basic duties and their challenges will ensure that dental practitioners go above and beyond upholding the principle of ‘patient first’, but also promoting and upholding the well-being of society and self, and the dignity and reputation of the profession.

I. Duties to Patients

A dental practitioner holds a critical position in the healthcare ecosystem, responsible for ensuring the overall oral health and well-being of patients. The overall aim of ‘duty to patients’ is to provide a standard of care that ensures their patients’ best interest, safety, and well-being, covering a wide range of practices to protect patients from harm, and respecting a patients right to self-determination, privacy, and fairness.⁵

Patient care and serving the patients’ best interests

A dental practitioner’s primary professional duty is to serve the patients best interests and well-being.^{5,6} This duty involves: (i) providing competent high-quality care; (ii) diagnosing conditions accurately, recommending and providing appropriate and fair treatment; (iii) preventing oral/dental disease; (iv) promoting oral health; (v) ensuring patient safety and comfort; and (vi) upholding informed consent and confidentiality.⁵ The rationale behind these duties is rooted in the ethical principles of beneficence (doing good / what is best for the patient), non-maleficence (“do no harm”), autonomy (patients right to make decisions regarding his/her treatment), and fairness.

Compliance with infection control and environmental safety standards

Compliance with appropriate safety requirements and infection control standard of care is an ethical obligation and is at the core and key to quality care and excellence in dentistry. Your dental surgery should always meet modern health and safety requirements, including easily accessible facilities, properly staffed, and services provided under acceptable professional standards. All equipment and instrumentation should be sterilised and packed appropriately. Rigorous infection control measures should also be implemented.

Informed consent and effective communication

A dental practitioner has an ethical and legal duty to obtain valid informed consent from a patient before starting

treatment or physical investigation.^{6,7} Dentists' therefore have an ethical duty to provide patients with sufficient and appropriate information in a manner that they can understand, to enable them to exercise their right to make informed decisions about their treatment.⁶ This involves clear and effective communication about (i) diagnosis of conditions and their implications; (ii) explaining treatment options, including that of 'no treatment'; (iii) their benefits, potential risks, and limitations, including the cost of treatment options; (iv) explain the clinical reasons behind their recommendations and consider patient preferences and concerns to find mutually acceptable solutions, enabling patients to give voluntary informed consent, without any coercion, manipulation, misrepresentation, before carrying out any treatment.⁸ For an individual to make a valid informed consent decision, capacity (absence of mental/cognitive impairment) or competence is a prerequisite.⁹

The rationale behind the duty of informed consent/refusal is rooted in the ethical principles autonomy (patients right to self-determination). Respecting patient autonomy is also the foundation for establishing a trustworthy relationship.^{6,7,10,11} This collaborative approach not only respects patient autonomy but also helps align their expectations with realistic clinical outcomes.

Promoting general health and well-being

Oral health is intricately connected to general health and well-being. Conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, Alzheimer's Disease, and other chronic systemic diseases are often linked to poor dental hygiene and periodontal disease. Chronic systemic diseases, mental health disorders, stress related disorders, sleep deprivation, and oral cancers directly impacts a patient's quality of life and longevity. Dental practitioners can contribute towards patients' general health and well-being, including their mental health by means of: (i) educating patients on the link between poor oral hygiene and systemic diseases; (ii) oral cancer screening; and (iii) advising patients on nutrition, diet, lifestyle behaviour (i.e., smoking, alcohol, sleep, exercise). The rationale behind the duty of promoting general health and well-being is rooted in the ethical principle beneficence (doing good).⁶

Disclosure of adverse events

A dental practitioner has an ethical duty to: (i) disclose adverse events to patients that may occur during treatment (e.g., separated endodontic file), or as soon as possible

afterwards; (ii) the nature and possible consequences of the adverse event; (iii) taking the necessary steps to address any harm caused to the patient, including advising on, or arranging for, further treatment or care if it is required; (iv) responding openly, honestly and professionally to any questions from a patient, or where appropriate, a parent, guardian or carer, in language and terms they can understand; and (v) recording the details of the adverse event in the patient's records, including information regarding communications with the patient and with third parties, such as parents or carers. The rationale behind the duty of disclosure of adverse events is rooted in the ethical principles beneficence (doing good), non-maleficence (do no harm), and fairness.⁶

Availability and emergency care

A dentist should be available, within reason, to address acute dental conditions (e.g., pain) of his/her patients as soon as possible. A person with an emergency condition should be examined and either treated or referred for treatment. In such situations, the patient's health and comfort must be the dentist's primary concern, not compensation or convenience. If a dentist cannot accommodate the patient's emergent needs, a reasonable effort should be made to have the patient seen in a timely manner by someone capable of treating the condition.¹² Dental practitioners are also responsible for making necessary arrangements for patients to access alternative care when they are not available (i.e., on sick leave or holiday).

Record keeping

A dental practitioner has a duty to keep a complete record of any consultations and treatment procedures carried out, documenting all aspects of patient care. The purpose of keeping health records are: to keep track of clinical findings; treatment completed, ensure continuation of care; and to provide evidence of the standard of care.¹³ Compulsory elements of a patients record are: (i) personal details; (ii) medical and dental history; (iii) time and date of consultation/treatment; (iv) proposed management; (iv) medication and dosage prescribed; (v) referral details; (v) patients response to treatment; (vi) investigations ordered and their results, including radiographic assessments; and (vii) written proof of informed consent.¹³ A patients record should comply with the following principles: contemporaneous; integrity; attributable; accessible ; and securely stored to ensure confidentiality and privacy.¹³

According to the HPCSA guidelines on the retention of

medical records: Records should be kept for at least six years after they become dormant. The records of minors should be kept until their 21st birthday. The records of patients who are mentally impaired should be kept until the patient's death.¹³

Confidentiality / Privacy of personal information

Dental practitioners hold information about patients that is private and sensitive. They therefore have a legal and ethical duty to safeguard the privacy of patients' personal and medical information, that protects the patient's rights and promotes trust in the practitioner-patient relationship. The National Health Act (No.61 of 2003) states that all patients have a right to confidentiality, and this is consistent with the right to privacy in the South African Constitution. Confidentiality and privacy is central to trust between healthcare practitioners and patient. The National Health Act provides that personal information must not be given to other unless the patient consents, or the healthcare practitioners can justify disclosure of information concerning them.¹ Dental practitioners should make sure that patients are aware that personal information about them will be shared within the healthcare team (i.e., specialist and laboratory technicians, medical aid) - and patients must be told the reasons for this. Make sure that the patient understands what information will be disclosed / shared and to whom.

Dental practitioners may only disclose information regarding a patient in the following circumstances: (i) if it is done in terms of a statutory provision; (ii) an instruction of court; (iii) in the public interest; (iv) with the express consent of a patient; (v) with a written consent of a parent or guardian of a minor under the age of 12 years; (vi) or in the case of a deceased patient, with the written consent of the next of kin or the executor of the deceased estate.¹ According to the Protection of Personal information Act No.4 of 2013 (also referred to as the POPI Act), dental practitioners and companies are legally required to carefully manage data capture, storage processes, and disclosing and communicating personal information to other stakeholders (i.e., healthcare practitioners, laboratory technicians, medical aids, and referral to specialists). The purpose of the POPI Act, a privacy law that safeguards the integrity and sensitivity of personal/private information, is to provide for the rights of persons regarding unsolicited electronic communication and automated decision-making, and to regulate the flow of personal information.

Dental practitioners have the following responsibilities regarding communication and safeguarding privacy and

disclosure of personal information: (i) accountability for ensuring POPIA compliance; (ii) personal information must only be collected for a specific purpose; (iii) further processing must be compatible with the original purpose of the collection of information; (iv) steps must be taken to ensure that personal information records are complete, accurate and up to date; (v) disclose only certain information to specific data subjects; (vi) ensure that appropriate, reasonable and organisational measures and safe-guards are implemented and maintained to prevent loss, damage or unauthorised destruction or unlawful use or access to personal information, and (vii) data subjects (patient) have the right to request personal information that a responsible party (dental practitioner) holds about them and in circumstances request access to such information. Dental practitioners are also responsible for ensuring that receptionists, assistants and other staff respect confidentiality in the performance of their duties.

Continuing Professional development and updating competence

Dentists have a duty to maintain technical competence, stay updated with the latest advancements in knowledge, and adopt evidence-based practices and skills, to offer the best possible standard of care. The ethical practice of the health profession requires consistent ongoing commitment to lifelong learning by all health practitioners through a process of Continuous Professional development (CPD). The Health Professions Act, 1974 (Act No.56 of 1974) endorses CPD as the means for maintaining and updating professional competence.¹⁴

All registered health practitioners are required to complete accredited continuing education activities annually. Health Practitioners may select activities at any level of learning that meet their particular needs and the demands of their practice environment.¹⁴ A dentist is required to engage in CPD and accumulate a total of 30 continuing education units (CEUs) per 12 month period of which 5 CEUs should be for ethics, human rights and health law. All CEUs are valid for a period of 24 months from the date that the activity took place/ended.¹⁴

*"Practitioners may obtain the CEUs within their own discipline, speciality or subspeciality or within another relevant discipline, speciality or sub-speciality that is relevant to their own professional practice."*¹⁴

Issuance of a CPD certificate is no longer mandatory. CPD providers will provide attendance information to the

HPCSA for every activity that a dental practitioner has attended. South African healthcare practitioners attending accredited professional meetings or activities internationally, will be recognised for CPD purposes.

Dental practitioners who are not compliant with CPD requirements may be subjected to the following actions: (i) changing the category of their registration to supervised practice, until proof of compliance with CPD requirements are submitted; (ii) suspension from the Register until submission of proof of compliance with CPD requirements is submitted; (iii) successfully passing a Board Examination; or (iv) any other resolution by the relevant Professional Board.¹⁴

Ensure continuity of care and avoid patient abandonment

Dental practitioners must approach ending a professional relationship with patients ethically, ensuring continuity of care during transition periods. To avoid patient abandonment, dentists should: (i) provide adequate notice to the patient if the dentist intends to discontinue treatment or retire; (ii) offer assistance in finding a new dental provider and transferring patient records if needed; and (iii) ensure that the patient's immediate oral health needs are addressed before the transition.

II. Duties to colleagues, peers, and other health care practitioners

With the rapid growth in scientific knowledge and its clinical applications, dentistry has become increasingly complex and integral part of the health ecosystem. Individual dentists cannot possibly be experts in all their patients' oral diseases and potential treatments and they need the assistance of other members of the dental healthcare team, including specialists, oral hygienists and laboratory technicians and other healthcare professionals such as medical specialists, pharmacists and speech therapists.

Collaboration and professionalism with other healthcare providers

Harmonious and effective teamwork is essential to provide patients with the best care. A dental practitioner's responsibilities to colleagues, other healthcare practitioners, as well staff members, include fostering a collaborative and respectful work environment. In professional relationships, dentists must uphold the principles of justice, ensuring that they treat colleagues and other members of the healthcare team, fairly, respect professional boundaries, and contribute to a positive and ethical work environment.¹² To foster

ethical collaborations and to ensure the highest standard of patient care, dental practitioners should: (i) maintain open communication and mutual respect when consulting or collaborating with other healthcare professionals; (ii) ensure that patient referrals are based on clinical needs and not influenced by financial incentives; (iii) respect the scope of practice of other healthcare providers and avoid encroaching on their expertise; (iv) respect differing opinions and engage in constructive dialogue; and (v) accept and support professional development and mentorship among peers.⁴

Referring patients to specialists with patient's best interest in mind

The FDI International Code of Dental Ethics states that dentists "should refer for advice and/or treatment for any patient requiring a level of competence beyond that held."⁴ Referring patients to specialists should prioritize the patient's well-being and align with their treatment needs. To make referrals ethically, dental practitioners have the following duties: (i) timely and accurate referrals to other healthcare professionals when patients require specialized care; (ii) discuss the reason for the referral with the patient and explain the benefits of seeing a specialist; (iii) provide the specialist with relevant patient information and treatment history to ensure continuity of care; (iv) communicate with the patient and specialist to coordinate treatment plans and follow-up care; and (v) document all relevant information regarding referrals.

Confidentiality and sharing of patient information

Sharing of information about a patient with members of a health care team providing a health service to a patient (e.g., specialist) would be permissible to the extent that: (i) it is necessary to enhance quality of care to be provided to the patient; and (ii) the patient has given consent to treatment and disclosure of such information to another healthcare practitioner.^{6,9}

Reporting unethical behaviour, misconduct, and violations of patient rights

Dentistry has traditionally taken pride in its status as a self-regulating profession including, established high standards of behaviour for its members, and disciplinary procedures to investigate accusations of misbehaviour. Dental practitioners have a duty to: (i) report unethical behaviour; (ii) misconduct; (iii) impairment (i.e., alcohol and substance abuse); (iv)

substandard care within the profession (incompetence); or (v) violations of patient rights.² This upholds the integrity of the profession and ensures that patients are not subjected to harm due to misconduct or negligence (i.e., dishonesty, violence, alcohol and substance abuse, or criminal acts).

The main requirement for self-regulation, however, is wholehearted support by dentists for its principles and their willingness to recognise and deal with unsafe and unethical practices. In recent years additional steps have been taken to make the profession more accountable, for example, by appointing lay members to regulatory authorities (HPCSA) and use of constructive and mutually supportive professional peer review. Irrespectively, reporting colleagues to a disciplinary authority should normally be a last resort after other alternatives have been tried and found wanting. The first step might be to approach the colleague and say that you consider his or her behaviour unsafe or unethical. If the matter can be resolved at that level, there may be no need to go further. If not, then it may be necessary to take the next step of informing a disciplinary authority.⁴

III. Duties to Society (Social responsibilities)

Although most dental practitioners may consider themselves first and foremost as private practitioners with a primary responsibility to their patients, they also have a social responsibility towards public, communities, environment, and laws and policies that affect public health.⁴

Promote oral health, general public health, and well-being

Dental practitioners have a broader social responsibility extending beyond the confines of their dental practices to promote public health and contributing to the well-being of society including: (i) active participation oral health education campaigns, and educational initiatives aimed at improving oral health awareness and preventing oral disease; (ii) participating in community outreach programs offering dental services particularly to underserved or marginalized populations who may face barriers to accessing oral health services or who cannot afford dental care; (iii) advocating policies for promoting equitable access to dental care, and better oral health practices; and (iv) staying informed about societal health issues that affect their patients, supporting initiatives that reduce dental health disparities and systemic inequalities.^{4,7}

By contributing to these initiatives, dental practitioners help reduce the burden of oral diseases, which can have

significant impacts on overall health. Dental practitioners should continuously aspire towards contributing to the betterment of society in accordance with their professional abilities and standing in the community. This engagement and relationship with the larger community also enhances the reputation of the profession.^{4,12}

In addition, some dental organisations are strongly influenced by religious teachings, which impose additional obligations on their members besides those applicable to all dentists.⁴ *“Maintaining the social power of the profession is an important endeavour as social prestige, financial reward, professional autonomy, and public legitimacy once lost, are not easily regained.”*¹⁵

Allocation of scarce resources and preventing wastage

The new understanding of the dentist’s responsibility to society relating to allocation of scarce resources and preventing wastage, is reflected in the FDI International Principles of Ethics for the Dental Profession where it states: *“The dentist should support and promote accepted measures to improve the oral health of the public.”*⁴ One way that dentists can exercise this responsibility insofar as it involves the allocation of resources is by avoiding wasteful and inefficient practices, even when patients request them. Clinical practice guidelines are available for some dental conditions; they help to distinguish between effective and ineffective treatments. Dentists should familiarise themselves with these guidelines, both to conserve resources and to provide optimal treatment to their patients.

Dental practitioners should also refrain from unnecessary wastage and participating in improper financial arrangements, especially those that escalate costs and disadvantage individuals unfairly.²

Environmental responsibility

Environmental ethical dentists are mindful of their impact on the environment, adopting eco-friendly practices, and minimizing waste to contribute to a sustainable future. Dentists are also responsible for practicing sustainably by using environmentally friendly materials and ensuring that health care waste is dispersed legally and in an environmentally friendly way and minimizing to environmental degradation.

Advertising - transparency, disclosure and misrepresentation

Dental practitioners should accurately represent themselves to the public and their peers. The dentist has a duty to: (i)

represent professional qualifications accurately without overstatement of fact or implying credentials that do not exist; (ii) avoid shaping the conclusions or perceptions of patients or other professionals by withholding or altering information that is needed for accurate assessment; (iii) disclose commercial relationships with companies when recommending products of those companies; (iv) disclose commercial relationships in professional presentations or publications where the dentist promotes or features products of those companies; (v) in case where a dentist have ties to commercial entities, they should fully disclose such relationships to patients and professional colleagues when nondisclosure would lead to differing conclusions, perceptions, or misrepresentation.¹²⁾

IV. Duty to oneself (Personal responsibility)

In many parts of the world, being a dentist has required devoting oneself to the practice of dentistry with little consideration for one's own health and personal well-being. Dentistry can be physically demanding, with long hours, repetitive motions, and high levels of concentration, which can lead to stress or burnout. Working weeks of 60-80 hours are not uncommon and vacations are considered to be unnecessary luxuries. Although some dentists seem to do well in these conditions, they themselves, their families and patients may be adversely affected. Some dentists clearly suffer from this pace of professional activity, with results ranging from chronic fatigue, substance abuse to suicide.⁴ Impaired dentists, due to stress and fatigue can result in dental errors and harm to the patient.

Selfcare - maintaining physical and mental health

Maintaining physical and mental health is essential for personal and professional well-being, happiness and ability to provide effective care. Dental practitioners therefore have a personal and professional responsibility to: (i) prioritize self-care; (ii) manage workload and stress; (iii) maintain work-life balance; and (iv) seek support when needed, to avoid compromising their physical and mental well-being, and consequently, the quality of care they provide.¹⁶ Besides avoiding activities that may affect their health and well-being that may lead to impairment such as, overwork or substance abuse, dentists should protect and enhance their own health and well-being by identifying stress factors in their professional and personal lives and by developing and practising appropriate coping strategies.² When these fail, they should seek help from colleagues and appropriately qualified professionals for personal problems that might

adversely affect their relationships with family, patients, society or colleagues.⁴

Registration as a dental practitioner with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA)

Dental practitioners are expected to adhere to legal and regulatory frameworks that govern the profession, including licensing requirements, continuing education, and compliance with public health guidelines. Legally, a dental practitioners' scope of duties is governed Health Profession Act, (Act No.56 of 1974). This duty of care Act sets out the obligations and standards expected of dentists working in South Africa.

This ensures that they provide care in a manner that is safe, ethical, and in line with societal expectations.

Indemnity cover

Although professional indemnity cover or insurance is not a statutory requirement in South Africa, it is recommended that all dental practitioners have professional indemnity cover that can protect them against a claim or liabilities arising from their practice. This will protect them against a legal liability to compensate third parties (patients) who have sustained injury, loss, or damage due to professional negligence or breach of professional duty in the conduct of ones' profession or occupation.¹⁷

There are basically two types of professional indemnity: Occurrence-based indemnity underwritten by Dental Protection¹⁷ will provide protection at all times, whilst you practice, when you retire, and even after you die, as claims can still be made against your estate for adverse incidents that occurred whilst you were practicing. The second type of indemnity is a Claims made insurance policy underwritten by PPS Health Professions Indemnity 24- provides indemnity for incidents that occur while your policy is in place. It does not provide contract certainty with regard to run-off cover after termination of your policy.

Self-reflection and continuous lifelong learning

Ethically, dentists must also reflect on themselves as well as their own practice(s), continually striving for personal and professional growth. The aim of self-reflection is: (i) a way of aiding development; (ii) improving wellbeing; and (iii) deepening professional commitment.¹⁸ Personal integrity and accountability are at the core of this duty, as practitioners must recognize their own limitations and seek further training or referrals when necessary.

Self-reflective practice is an intrinsic part of healthcare provision and training, and it has become synonymous with CPD. It involves regular self-assessment, seeking peer feedback, and being open to constructive criticism. Self-reflection is a key requirement of the learning process that helps to elicit deeper learning. In healthcare, it uses experiential activities to produce knowledge that compels the clinician to change their practice.²⁰ In medical education, reflective practice is rapidly becoming a competence in its own right; it enhances personal responsibility for learning and supports professional development.²¹ *“The use of reflection ‘leads to personal insight, improved practice and greater professionalism, all of which are key attributes to developing a safe and holistic practitioner.’”*²¹

Through self-reflection and life-long learning, dental professionals can identify areas for improvement and develop strategies to enhance or update their practice. By implementing self-reflection as a continuous process, dental professionals can enhance their knowledge and skills, ultimately improving patient care and outcomes.¹⁹ Not only does this afford greater clinical confidence and job satisfaction, but it also ensures high-quality, evidence-based patient care.²² The constituent elements of lifelong learning - choices, collegiality, challenges and consequences- can work synergistically in the interests of patients and well-being of healthcare practitioners alike.²⁵

Manage conflict of interest between patient and business

While dentistry is first a profession, the practice of dentistry usually involves financial compensation for professional services and therefore regarded as a business or commercial entity. Since dentists are in a position to gain financially from their professional recommendations or services, they are at risk of having a conflict of interest, whether actual or perceived. The patient is the beneficiary of the dentist's services. If the dentist is being compensated for professional services, then the dentist is also technically a “beneficiary” of his or her recommendations or treatment to a patient. Although a patient's ability to pay for services may be a consideration in these professional decision-making and treatment recommendations, the level of financial gain must never be a consideration. If the patient's relevant interests are always considered, the profession of dentistry can ethically exist within a business structure.¹² No treatment or treatment plan should ever be motivated by self-interest, greed, or financial gain, to the detriment of the patient.¹⁶

Personal behaviour and manners – maintaining integrity, confidence and public trust

A dental practitioners' status as members of a respected profession brings many privileges that are not enjoyed by people in other walks of life. If we abuse those privileges, we do so at our own peril because a position of trust and respect is much more easily lost, than it is regained after having been lost.^{15,23}

There are subtle components of conduct and behaviour by which a person communicates what he or she stands for, not only in the acts the person chooses, but also both in how those acts are chosen and in how the person presents to others in carrying them out.¹²

A healthcare professional such as a dentist arguably needs a slightly different set of core values compared to a politician or military leader. What is more important, perhaps, is that the public will expect certain things of doctors, dentists and other healthcare professionals. Thus, when a dental practitioners behaviour falls short of the expected standards, it is often quite easy for us to conclude that this is unacceptable behaviour for someone in that position. Appropriate personal behaviour and manners, also referred to as etiquette, inside and outside the workspace include: (i) use appropriate language and refrain from swearing; (ii) always follow appropriate workplace dress code or norms; (iii) refrain from gossiping; (iv) don't talk about work on the social media; (v) be polite, and courteous and stay humble; and (v) always smile and be positive.

Healthcare professionals should therefore always keep to professional etiquette and have good manners inside and outside the workplace as this will earn them the respect of other employees and staff, and will uphold their professional reputation, as well as that of the practice, or organization and profession.

Conclusion

Dental practitioners hold a critical position in the healthcare ecosystem, with the primary duty of providing comprehensive, ethical, and patient-centered oral health care, that will ensure the well-being and best interest of their patients. To meet this objective, a dental practitioner's duties span multiple dimensions, from patient care, to professional collaboration, societal contributions, and maintaining personal well-being.

To patients, dentists must provide high-quality, safe, compassionate care with respect for their autonomy and rights. To staff, colleagues, other health care professionals,

they must foster a respectful, collaborative, and ethical work environment. Their social contract demands that they contribute towards promoting public health and advocating for equitable access to care, while adhering to legal and ethical standards. Lastly, they must prioritize their own well-being and engage in continuous education and professional growth, recognizing that this not only directly affects their ability to fulfil their broader obligations of improving patient care and outcomes, but will also afford greater clinical confidence, job satisfaction, personal fulfilment and professional credibility.

By upholding these responsibilities, dental practitioners not only maintain the trust placed in them by their patients and society but also contribute to the integrity and advancement of the profession. The balance of knowledge, technical expertise, ethical conduct, and personal care is essential for the long-term success and sustainability of a dental practitioner's career.

References

A full list of References 1-25 is available in the References document