

BASIC ETHICS AND PROFESSIONALISM

AUTHOR (s)

Health Professions Council of South Africa

Compiled and edited by: **Pirindha Govender** University of KwaZulu Natal (UKZN) Durban, South Africa

REVIEWER (s)

Michael G Harris Associate Dean Emeritus, University of California, School of Optometry, Berkley, USA

AIMS

This unit aims to outline some of the main elements of basic ethics and professionalism.

WHAT YOU WILL LEARN

When you'll have worked through this unit you should have an understanding of the following:

- Ethical codes for health professionals
- Principles of ethics for optometrists
- Professionalism - Standards of Conduct
- Optometric Regulations & Licensing
- Continuing professional education
- Professional communication
- Professional advocacy

ETHICAL CODES FOR HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

According to Pierscioneck (2008), ethical codes contain guiding principles, which help practitioners with their decision-making and to practice in accordance with a set of standards that are expected of a healthcare practitioner. Beauchamp and Childress (2001) suggested that there were four major ethical principles in health care:

1. Beneficence
2. Non-maleficence
3. Respect for Autonomy
4. Justice

These principles can be described as follows:

BENEFICENCE: BEST INTEREST OR WELL-BEING	Health care practitioners should only make decisions that are in the best interests of their patients even when those interests conflict with their own personal self-interest. Beneficence assumes that every patient who enters the practice should leave in a better state, or at the very least, not in a worse state.
NON-MALEFICENCE: TO DO NO HARM	Health care practitioners should not harm or act against the best interests of patients, even when the interests of the latter conflict with their own self-interest.
AUTONOMY:	Health care practitioners should respect the right of patients to make their own informed choices (self-determination) and to live their lives according to their own beliefs, values and preferences. This demands a responsibility of the practitioner to keep the patient informed of any condition and to provide information on treatment options so that patients may make informed choices.
JUSTICE:	<p>Health care practitioners should treat all individuals and groups in an impartial, fair and just manner. Whether a practitioner practices according to the ethical principles of Justice is determined by the amount of time spent with a particular patient, what resources are allocated to this particular patient's care and how this compares to other patients.</p> <p>In addition to the four major ethical principles stated above, there are various other principles that should guide optometric practice. They include:</p>
RESPECT FOR PERSONS:	Health care practitioners should respect each patient as an individual person and acknowledge their intrinsic worth, dignity and sense of value.
HUMAN RIGHTS:	Health care practitioners should recognise the human rights of all individuals.
INTEGRITY:	Health care practitioners should incorporate these core ethical values and standards so that they form the foundation for their character and practice.
TRUTHFULNESS:	Health care practitioners should regard the truth and truthfulness as the basis of trust in their professional relationships with patients.
CONFIDENTIALITY:	Health care practitioners should treat personal and private information obtained from a patient as confidential - unless overriding reasons confer a moral or legal right to disclosure.
COMPASSION:	Health care practitioners should be sensitive to, and empathise with, the individual and social needs of their patients and seek to create mechanisms for providing comfort and support where appropriate and possible.
TOLERANCE:	Health care practitioners should respect the rights of people to have different ethical beliefs, which arise from deeply held personal, religious and cultural convictions.
PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE AND SELF-IMPROVEMENT:	Health care practitioners should continually endeavor to attain the highest level of knowledge and skills required within their area of practice.
COMMUNITY:	Health care practitioners should strive to contribute to the betterment of society in accordance with their professional abilities and standing within the community.

PRINCIPLES OF ETHICS FOR OPTOMETRY

Optometrists are governed by strict ethical guidelines usually outlined by the relevant authorities, for example a health professions council, an optometric council, etc. These authorities differ from country to country.

There are several critical aspects outlined in these ethical guidelines:

- The **primary professional duty** of the optometrist must always be concerned with the best interests or well-being of the patient. This would involve prioritizing the provision of proper eye care before monetary gain.
- The **status of the profession** is upheld by ensuring that neither the optometrist nor their colleagues are engaged in any professional misconduct. This responsibility would include the optometrist reporting any violations of professional conduct to the relevant authorities.

PROFESSIONALISM – STANDARDS OF CONDUCT

Honesty and integrity are the fundamental traits expected of an optometrist.

The standards of conduct maintained by an optometrist are reflected in the way in which they fulfill their basic responsibilities. These include:

WELFARE TO HUMANITY:	The optometrist has a responsibility to serve the needs of humanity. Monetary gain should remain subordinate to the needs of humanity.
CONTINUING COMPETENCE:	It is the responsibility of an optometrist to strive to keep up-to-date with modern development in the profession, to enhance both knowledge and proficiency by adopting modern methods and scientific concepts which are of proven worth and to contribute personally to the general knowledge and advancement of the profession. All of these things should be done with the welfare of the public in mind.
INFORMED CONSENT:	Optometrists must provide a patient with sufficient information in order to obtain informed consent from the patient.
EMERGENCY OPTOMETRIC CARE:	An optometrist is required to respond immediately when called upon in the event of an emergency. The optometrist must not abandon or neglect the patient once the immediate request is taken care of.
CHARGES FOR MATERIALS:	Charges for materials must be clearly stated separately from professional fees.
INFORMING THE PUBLIC:	An optometrist must comply with rules of legislative organizations. Advertisement and dissemination of information regarding professional services must be lawfully conducted.
RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER OPTOMETRISTS:	Optometrists must be able to maintain true and professional relationships with other optometrists and health care professionals. This is key to a multidisciplinary approach to the provision of health services for the public.

OPTOMETRIC LICENSING AND REGULATIONS

LICENSING:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Optometrists usually have to be registered with a board of optometry in their respective countries. • The licensing of optometrists is put in place to ensure that they meet the standards of knowledge and skill required to provide optimal patient care. • In some countries national board exams have to be written by practitioners before they can obtain a license to practice optometry.
REGULATIONS:	<p>There are several regulations that govern the profession and practice of optometry. These may differ from country to country. The regulations include but are not limited to the following:</p> <p>Advertising and canvassing or touting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advertising is allowed as long as it is not unprofessional, untruthful, deceptive, misleading or causes consumers unwarranted anxiety that they may be suffering from any health condition. • Practitioners are not allowed to canvass or tout nor can they allow canvassing or touting to be done for patients on their behalf. <p>Information on professional stationery</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A practitioner shall print or have printed on letterheads, account forms and electronic stationery information pertaining only to such practitioner's – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Name – Profession – Registered category – Speciality or subspeciality or field of professional practice (if any) – Registered qualifications or other academic qualifications or honorary – Degrees in abbreviated form – Registration number – Addresses (including email address) – Telephone and fax numbers – Practice or consultation hours – Practice code number – Dispensing licence number (if any) <p>Naming of a practice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A practitioner shall use his or her own name or the name(s) of a registered practitioner or practitioners with whom he or she is in partnership or with whom he or she practises as a juristic person, as the name used for his or her private practice. <p>Itinerant practice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A practitioner may conduct a regularly recurring itinerant practice at a place where another practitioner is established if, in such itinerant practice, such practitioner renders the same level of service to patients, at the same fee as the service which he or she would render in the area in which he or she is conducting a resident practice.

REGULATIONS:

Fees and commission

- A practitioner shall not accept commission or any material consideration, (monetary or otherwise) from a person or from another practitioner or institution in return for the purchase, sale or supply of any goods, substances or materials used by him or her in the conduct of his or her professional practice.

Supersession

- A practitioner shall not supersede or take over a patient from another practitioner if he or she is aware that such patient is in active treatment with another practitioner, unless he or she takes reasonable steps to inform the other practitioner that he or she has taken over the patient at such patient's request

Impeding a patient

- A practitioner shall not impede a patient, or in the case of a minor, the parent or guardian of such minor, from obtaining the opinion of another practitioner or from being treated by another practitioner.

Professional reputation of colleagues

- A practitioner shall not cast reflections on the probity (uprightness), professional reputation or skill of another person registered under any Health Act.

Professional confidentiality

- A practitioner shall divulge verbally or in writing, information regarding a patient which he or she ought to divulge only:
 - in terms of a statutory provision;
 - at the instruction of a court of law; or
 - where justified, in the public interest.
 - where there is expressed consent of the patient

CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION (CPE)

- Continuing Professional Education (CPE) involves the engagement of practitioners in educational activities, which serve to maintain, develop and increase their knowledge, skills and professional performance.
- CPE ensures that optometrists keep abreast of new developments in their respective fields.
- CPE allows the profession to provide quality up-to-date eye-care services to the public.
- CPE activities are usually assigned a certain number of points based on the nature and duration of the activity. Points accumulated during CPE activities are usually monitored by a national governing health care body. Practitioners not meeting the point requirements set out for CPE activities can face disqualification from practicing optometry until they comply with the regulated number of activities or points gained from CPE activities.

PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION

- Adequate professional communication is a fundamental ethical requirement for all professional relationships. Good communication should exist first and foremost between the health care professional and the patient.
- The first responsibility of the health care professional is to listen to the patient and to take heed of the way in which the patient is communicating. If the patient is reluctant to communicate, the practitioner must ensure that he/she presents an environment that is non-threatening so as to enable the patient to communicate more comfortably and effectively.
- The following rules for effective communication between practitioner and patient are recommended as follows:
 - The practitioner should repeat back to the patient what he/she has gathered from the conversation, thereby giving the patient the assurance that the practitioner has listened to what has been said. It also highlights for the patient if the practitioner has misinterpreted any of the information given.
 - Ensure the patient understands the purpose of the questions being asked by explaining their significance. In this way, there is no misinterpretation on the part of the patient with respect to the importance of the information being gathered during the interview/case history process.
- Practitioners can request that the patient provide the answers in the most honest manner possible. If any deceit is suspected on the part of the patient, then the practitioner must address the issue since it is a breach of the contract between the practitioner and the patient.
- An especially important aspect of professional communication is the maintenance of confidentiality, especially if the patient requests that his/her privacy be respected. While taking note of this fact, it is also the duty of the practitioner to communicate any information deemed necessary to prevent serious harm coming to the patient or to others, even if the information was given to the practitioner in confidence.

PROFESSIONAL ADVOCACY

Professional advocacy is about supporting optometrists and other eye care professionals through professionalism and its key determinants:

AUTONOMY:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Autonomy involves allowing professionals to fully apply their scope of practice without hindering their practice.
COMPETENCE:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competence involves analyzing the level of care being provided by other eye care professionals ensuring that the needs of the patient are being met. In the event that the eye-care professional notices that other professionals are not performing in the best interests of the patient, then it is the duty of the professional to report any ethical violations to the relevant authorities.
COLLABORATION:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration within the profession and between various other health care professionals becomes necessary especially in cases where inter- or multidisciplinary approaches to patient care are required.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Health Professions Council of South Africa Guidelines.

Pierscione B. Ethics in Optometric Practice - The Obligations that Define a Profession.
Journal of Optometry. 2008 1(1): 5-7.

Beauchamp T L and Childress J F. Principles of Biomedical Ethics, 5th Edition. Oxford University Press, 2001.