



Dental Hygienists' Code of Ethics

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THE CANADIAN DENTAL
HYGIENISTS ASSOCIATION
L'ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE
DES HYGIÉNISTES DENTAIREs

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Preamble

The CDHA Code of Ethics sets out the ethical principles and responsibilities which apply to all members of the dental hygiene profession across all practice areas including clinical care, education, research, administration and any other role related to the profession of dental hygiene.

Ethics is the study of moral values and moral reasoning. Ethical codes are formal statements that guide members of a profession in their obligations to clients, colleagues, the larger society, and to global health.*

The **Code of Ethics** serves to:

- 1 Articulate the ethical principles and responsibilities by which dental hygienists are guided and under which they are accountable;
- 2 Provide a professional resource for education, reflection, self-evaluation, and peer review within dental hygiene and the broader health care community;
- 3 Inform the public about the ethical principles and responsibilities of the dental hygiene profession.

Dental hygienists' primary responsibility is to the client. In this document, "client" refers to a person or persons or a community with whom dental hygienists are engaged in a professional relationship. These relationships occur in all areas of dental hygiene practice including clinical services (e.g., private dental offices, independent practice, schools, community/public health clinics, acute and long term care, corporate environments); education, research, regulatory and policy roles; and administration/employment.

Dental hygienists work in an interprofessional collaborative environment. They are accountable to other codes of ethics/ethical guidelines including those of their provincial/territorial regulatory authority and their workplace. The CDHA **Code of Ethics** is a strong foundational document, effective on its own, and complementary to other ethical codes that address more specific situations and behaviours.

Dental hygienists use the **Code of Ethics** in conjunction with professional standards, workplace policies, and laws and regulations that guide practices and behaviours. In achieving these requirements, they fulfill their contract with society to meet a high standard of ethical practice.

* "Global Health is the health of populations in a global context and transcends the perspectives and concerns of individual nations." The World Health Organization and the Transition from "International" to "Global" Public Health. Brown et al., *AJPH*: Jan 2006, Vol 96, No 1.

<http://www.ajph.org/cgi/reprint/96/1/62>

Ethical Principles

The “Principles” depict the broad ideals to which dental hygienists aspire and which guide their practice. The “Responsibilities” outlined on the following pages are more precise and provide direction for behaviours in ethical situations.

1 Principle: Beneficence

Beneficence involves caring about and acting to promote the good of another. Dental hygienists use their knowledge and skills to assist clients to achieve and maintain optimal oral health and overall wellbeing, and to promote fair and reasonable access to quality oral health services as an integral part of the healthcare system.

4 Principle: Accountability

Accountability pertains to taking responsibility for one’s actions and omissions in light of relevant principles, standards, laws, and regulations. It includes the potential to self evaluate and be evaluated. It involves practising competently and accepting responsibility for behaviours and decisions in the professional context.

2 Principle: Autonomy

Autonomy pertains to the right to make one’s own choices. By communicating relevant information openly and truthfully, dental hygienists assist clients to make informed choices and to participate actively in achieving and maintaining their optimal oral health.

5 Principle: Confidentiality

Confidentiality is the duty to hold secret any information acquired in the professional relationship. Dental hygienists respect a client’s privacy and hold in confidence information disclosed to them except in certain narrowly defined exceptions.

3 Principle: Integrity

Integrity relates to consistency of actions, values, methods, expectations, and outcomes. It includes the promotion of fairness and social justice with consideration for those clients more vulnerable. It conveys a sense of wholeness and strength, and doing what is right with honesty and truthfulness.

Principles and Responsibilities

Principle: Beneficence

Beneficence involves caring about and acting to promote the good of another. Dental hygienists use their knowledge and skills to assist clients to achieve and maintain optimal oral health and overall wellbeing, and to promote fair and reasonable access to quality oral health services as an integral part of the healthcare system.

Responsibilities for Beneficence

- 1** Dental hygienists put the needs, values, and interests of clients first.
- 2** Dental hygienists provide services to clients in a caring manner with respect for their individual needs, values, culture, safety, and life circumstances, and in recognition of their inherent dignity.
- 3** Dental hygienists regard informed choice as a precondition of intervention, and honour a client's informed choice including refusal of intervention.
- 4** Dental hygienists recommend or provide those services that they believe are necessary for promoting and maintaining a client's oral health and its effect on total body health and wellness, and which are consistent with the client's informed choice.
- 5** Dental hygienists take appropriate action to ensure a client's safety and quality of care when they suspect unethical or incompetent care.
- 6** Dental hygienists seek to improve the quality of care, and advance knowledge in the field of oral health through advocacy and interprofessional practice.

Principle: Autonomy

Autonomy pertains to the right to make one's own choices. By communicating relevant information openly and truthfully, dental hygienists assist clients to make informed choices and to participate actively in achieving and maintaining their optimal oral health.

Responsibilities for Autonomy

- 1 **Dental hygienists** actively involve clients in their oral healthcare and promote informed choice by communicating relevant information openly, truthfully, and sensitively in recognition of their needs, values, and capacity to understand.
- 2 **Dental hygienists** Involve and promote informed choice by substitute decision maker(s) in situations where clients lack the capacity for informed choice.
- 3 **Dental hygienists** In the event of a substitute decision maker, involve clients to the extent of their capacity.
- 4 **Dental hygienists** Recognize cultural differences, and assess and plan interventions with individuals and populations receiving their services relative to the cultural context.



Principle: Integrity

Integrity relates to consistency of actions, values, methods, expectations, and outcomes. It includes the promotion of fairness and social justice, with consideration for those clients more vulnerable. It conveys a sense of wholeness and strength, and doing what is right with honesty and truthfulness.

Responsibilities for Integrity

- 1** **Dental hygienists** uphold the principles and standards of the profession with clients, colleagues and others with whom they are engaged in a professional relationship
- 2** **Dental hygienists** maintain and advance their knowledge and skills in dental hygiene through lifelong learning.
- 3** **Dental hygienists** provide quality of interventions through ongoing self evaluation and quality assurance.
- 4** **Dental hygienists** promote conditions that enable social, economic, cultural values and institutions compatible with meeting basic human rights and dignity.
- 5** **Dental hygienists** collaborate with colleagues in a cooperative, constructive and respectful manner with the primary goal of providing safe, competent, fair and high quality interventions to individuals, families and communities.
- 6** **Dental hygienists** promote workplace practices and policies that facilitate professional practice in accordance with the principles, standards, laws and regulations under which they are accountable.
- 7** **Dental hygienists** communicate the nature and costs of professional services fairly and accurately, adhering to guidelines and/or regulations for advertising as outlined by their jurisdictional regulatory authority.

Principle: Accountability

Accountability pertains to taking responsibility for one's actions and omissions in light of relevant principles, standards, laws, and regulations. It includes the potential to self evaluate and to be evaluated. It involves practising competently and accepting responsibility for behaviours and decisions in the professional context.

Responsibilities for Accountability

- 1** Dental hygienists accept responsibility for knowing and acting consistently with the principles, practice standards, laws and regulations under which they are accountable.
- 2** Dental hygienists practise within the bounds of their competence, scope of practice, personal and/or professional limitations.
- 3** Dental hygienists refer clients who require services outside their scope of practice to the appropriate professional.
- 4** Dental hygienists address issues in the practice environment that may hinder or impede the provision of care.
- 5** Dental hygienists inform their employers about the principles, standards, laws and regulations to which dental hygienists are accountable and determine whether employment conditions facilitate safe professional practice.
- 6** Dental hygienists inform their employers and/or appropriate regulatory authority of unethical practice by a colleague (see Appendix C).
- 7** Dental hygienists inform the appropriate regulatory authority in the event of becoming unable to practise safely and competently.



Principle: Confidentiality

Confidentiality is the duty to hold secret any information acquired in the professional relationship. Dental hygienists respect a client's privacy and hold in confidence information disclosed to them except in certain narrowly defined exceptions.

Responsibilities for Confidentiality

- 1 **Dental hygienists** demonstrate respect for the privacy of clients.
- 2 **Dental hygienists** promote practices, policies and information systems that are designed to respect and protect clients' privacy and confidentiality.
- 3 **Dental hygienists** understand and respect the potential of compromising confidentiality when connecting with clients through social networks or other electronic media.
- 4 **Dental hygienists** hold confidential any information acquired in the professional relationship and do not use or disclose confidential information to others without a client's express consent. Exceptions include:
 - As required by law,
 - As required by the policy of the practice environment (e.g., quality assurance),
 - In an emergency situation,
 - In situations where disclosure is necessary to prevent serious harm to others,
 - To the client's guardian or substitute decision maker.
- 5 **Dental hygienists** inform clients in advance of treatment of how their information may be shared, in particular, around any uses or sharing that may occur without the client's express consent.
- 6 **Dental hygienists** obtain a client's consent to use or share information about his/her circumstances for the purpose of teaching or research.

Appendix A: Ethical challenges

Dental hygienists face ethical challenges in their work regardless of setting. Continuous change in the profession and its practice—in social norms and values, and in rapidly emerging technology and social media—contribute to stress and dilemmas on a daily basis. When dental hygienists can distinguish the type of ethical challenge they are experiencing, they are better able to discuss it with colleagues and supervisors, take steps to address it at an early stage, and receive support and guidance in dealing with it. Identifying the ethical concern can be a defining moment that allows positive outcomes to emerge from difficult experiences.

Three commonly encountered ethical challenges are: **Ethical Distress**, **Ethical Dilemmas**, and **Ethical Violation**.

Ethical Distress* arises in situations where dental hygienists know or believe they know the right thing to do, but for various reasons (including fear or circumstances beyond their control) do not or cannot take the right action or prevent a particular harm. When values and commitments are compromised in this way, dental hygienists' identity and integrity are affected and they feel ethical distress. It takes ethical courage for dental hygienists to stand firm on a point of principle or a particular decision in the face of fear or threat to themselves.

Ethical Dilemmas* arise when there are equally compelling reasons for and against two or more possible courses of action, and where choosing one course of action means that something else is relinquished or let go. True dilemmas are infrequent in healthcare. More often, there are complex ethical problems with multiple courses of actions from which to choose.

Ethical Violation* involves actions or failures to act that breach fundamental duties to clients or to colleagues and other health-care providers.

* Definitions are derived from *Canadian Nurses Association: Code of Ethics, 2008. (pp. 6-7)*

www.cna-aiic.ca

Appendix B: Guidelines for ethical decision making

The following guide is designed to assist dental hygienists faced with an ethical challenge to work towards resolution.

Steps in Decision Making	Decision Making Process
<p>Step 1: Describe the issue and Identify the nature of the problem.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kind of issue is it? • What ethical principles are involved?
<p>Step 2: Gather information relevant to the challenge or problem including factual information about the situation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elaborate and clarify what happened. • What is the sequence of events? • What are the applicable policies, legislation or regulations • Does a workplace policy address the issue? • What does the Code say? • What does legislation or regulation say? • Who are the relevant stakeholders? How do they view the situation?
<p>Step 3: Clarify the challenge or problem.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the issue? • What ethical principles are at stake? • What stakeholders need to be consulted or involved in resolving the issue? • Is unethical conduct by a peer or other professional colleague suspected? (See: Appendix C)
<p>Step 4: Identify options for actions, recognizing that the best option may not be obvious at first.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What options are there which could resolve the issue?

Steps in Decision Making

Decision Making Process

Step 5: Assess the various options in light of applicable policy, legislation or regulation in terms of advantages and limitations of each.

- What are the pros and cons of each option in terms of rectifying and/or satisfying the ethical principle?
Do all options fall within applicable laws or policies?

Step 6: Decide on a course of action, taking all the gathered information into account.

- What is the best option for the clients involved that upholds ethical principles?
- How will you justify or defend your decision in light of ethical principles, applicable policy, legislation or regulation?

Step 7: Implement your decision as thoughtfully and sensitively as possible.

- How will you ensure that in the process of acting upon your decision you uphold ethical principles?
- How will you explain and/or justify the reasons for your decision?

Step 8: Assess the consequences of your decision.

- Evaluate the process you used to arrive at the decision and the decision itself.
- Did things turn out as you thought they would?
- Would you do the same thing again?
- What went right? What went wrong?
- Would others benefit from sharing the experience?



Appendix C: Guidelines for reporting suspected unethical conduct

All dental hygienists are expected to be familiar with the requirements of their provincial regulatory legislation as it pertains to ethical conduct, and to existing protocols in their practice setting for reporting incidents of unethical conduct.

The first consideration if unethical conduct is suspected in colleagues is always the welfare of and/or potential harm to clients. The following steps outline how to proceed when confronted with such a situation:

- 1 Confirm the facts of the situation.
- 2 When possible, resolve the issue within the practice setting.
- 3 When the issue cannot be satisfactorily resolved within the practice setting, report to the appropriate authority as outlined in workplace protocols or directly to the jurisdictional regulatory authority as required by the legislation.

Provincial/Territorial regulatory authorities for dental hygienists

British Columbia College of Oral Health Professionals:	BC	www.oralhealthbc.ca
Alberta College of Dental Hygienists:	AB	www.acdh.ca
Saskatchewan Dental Hygienists' Association:	SK	www.sdha.ca
College of Dental Hygienists of Manitoba:	MB	www.cdhm.info
College of Dental Hygienists of Ontario:	ON	www.cdho.org
Ordre des hygiénistes dentaires du Québec :	QC	www.ohdq.com
New Brunswick College of Dental Hygienists:	NB	www.nbcdh.ca
College of Dental Hygienists of Nova Scotia:	NS	www.cdhnsc.ca
College of Dental Hygienists of Prince Edward Island:	PEI	www.cdhppei.ca
Newfoundland and Labrador College of Dental Hygienists:	NL	www.nlcdh.com
Government of Yukon:	YT	www.yukon.ca
Northwest Territories Professional Licensing, Government of NWT:	NT	www.hss.gov.nt.ca
Department of Health, Government of Nunavut:	NU	www.gov.nu.ca/health

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...believe that

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