

# Ethics in Oral and Maxillofacial Pathology

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## ABSTRACT

Ethics are valued for centuries. Every professional gets respect if he follows the ethical guidelines set by their professional body. Dentistry is no exception to this. The Dental Council of India has set guidelines for dental practitioners in India. Ethics are more important for the maxillofacial pathologist as it involves the diagnosis of grave situations e.g., oral cancer which has a drastic effect on the future life of the patients so all the professional guidelines must be followed and the privacy of the patients must be maintained, especially in the era of social media. The rights of patients over the submitted tissue must be respected.

**Keywords:** Ethics; Oral & Maxillofacial pathologist, The privacy of a patient.

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## INTRODUCTION

Ethics comes from the Greek word *Ēthika* and derives from *ēthos*, the Greek word meaning character. Aristotle believed character is of central importance to ethics, and one cannot have a good character without having formed good *ethoi* or habits. So, ethics is Greek for customs, and morality comes from “*mores*”, which is Latin for customs.<sup>1</sup>

Ethics or moral behavior is the ground on which humanity stands for companionable survival. To sustain an ethical life and discriminate right from wrong are common issues that must be determined and applied. Different people have different understandings of the term ‘ethics’ as it is based on moral, philosophic and religious principles of the society in which it is practiced.<sup>2</sup>

The Hippocratic Oath has been used most widely from the Greek medical texts. It requires a new physician to swear upon some healing gods that he will uphold several professional, ethical standards.<sup>3</sup>

Personal prejudice has no place in a doctor’s life. For instance, the doctor should treat his patient suffering from alcoholic cirrhosis or chronic bronchitis, even though it is the patient’s habit of consuming alcohol or smoking. The doctor cannot deny treatment and should treat him with sympathy. If the physician withholds his service, it is considered as shedding blood.<sup>4</sup>

According to FDI International’s “Principles of Ethics for the Dental Profession that the dentist should act in a manner that will enhance the prestige and reputation of the profession”.<sup>5</sup>

Dentists in India are regulated by the Dental Council of India (DCI) and it is financed by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India. DCI is a statutory body incorporated under an act of parliament, viz., the Dentists Act, 1948 (XVI of 1948). While DCI mainly deals with dental education in India, the state dental councils, constituted

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under section 21 of the Dentists Act, 1948, including a Joint State Council constituted under an agreement under section 22, register, regulate, and monitor the dental practice in the respective states.<sup>6</sup>

Codes of Ethics in dentistry have been described by Indian Dental Association (IDA). The practice of Dentistry, being a part of healthcare, requires dentists to have compassion, competence and autonomy.<sup>7</sup>

Her dentist safeguards the patient’s best interests by choosing the right diagnostic tests and treatment plans that seem best for the individual’s needs. Oral pathology (oral and maxillofacial pathology/head and neck pathology) is a specialized field of pathology dealing with the diseases of the oral cavity and its associated structures (i.e., teeth, tongue; bony tissue [maxilla and mandible]; joint [temporomandibular joint]; lymph nodes; nerves; structures in neck and blood vessels of the ear, nose and throat [pharynx and larynx]). The qualified doctors in this domain are called oral and maxillofacial pathologists. The branch of oral pathology was on track in India way back in the 1950s, with postgraduation initiated in the 1960s.

## Oral and Maxillofacial Pathology and Microbiology

Of all the dental specialties, oral pathology is the foundation subject on which the science of dentistry stands, and this branch is exceptional in many aspects. It is the only branch of dentistry representing the confluence of basic sciences and clinical dentistry, covering the subjects of hematology, biochemistry, immunology, serology, microbiology, oncology, histopathology and cytopathology.<sup>8</sup>

Following Ethics in this branch of dentistry by oral pathologists is extremely important as they are dealing with a diagnosis of oral cancer. India has the highest number of oral cancers and other head and neck pathologies, making this specialty unique. Oral cancer is the third most common cancer and accounts for 30% of all malignancies in India. Head and neck pathologies constitute 30–40% of all the cases arising from cytopathology and histopathology in any diagnostic laboratory on a routine basis in various forms.<sup>8,9</sup>

## Oral and Maxillofacial Pathologist and Patient Relation

Ethics must be followed at every stage, commencement with the relationship between the patient and oral and maxillofacial pathologist. There is not much face-to-face interaction between patient and oral pathologists as the latter's responsibilities mostly include interpreting a biopsy specimen, surgical resection, or cytology fluid sample; reviewing a peripheral blood smear or cytology, and maintaining chemistry, microbiology, haematology, or molecular laboratory. But this relationship can be made unique, as this branch is a bridge between dentistry and medicine. An ethical oral pathologist is obliged to protect patients' privacy, ensure that a specimen remains uniquely identified with a specific patient and treat patients' specimens, parts, and bodies with respect.<sup>10</sup>

Accurate as well as the in-time histopathological diagnosis is a vital link in patient management. The largest number of treatment failures is related to either wrong or delayed diagnosis. A considerable diagnostic error rate published in surgical pathology and cytopathology literature ranges from 0.25 to 6%.<sup>11,12</sup>

So, it becomes morally and ethically important for an oral pathologist to share a preliminary diagnosis with a patient who desires that information. In a dental setup, the patient is informed about the lesion or future of diagnosed disease through the clinician, as there is direct communication between the oral pathologist and his or her clinical colleagues. This honesty and openness should also be applied to the patient-oral pathologist relationship.

## Ethics to be followed by Oral and Maxillofacial Pathologists

Careful attention must be given by oral & maxillofacial pathologists on diagnosis making, as the matter of subjectivity is involved. Oral pathologists should discuss this among themselves before giving a final diagnosis to avoid misdiagnosis.

Also, maxillofacial pathologist needs to discuss and correlate the case with the referring physician as they have direct contact with the patient and know more about their clinical history.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, certain guidelines have been suggested in the earlier literature for maintaining quality and ethical practice in histopathology, including a random review of reported events, blind review, intra and inter-departmental audit, expert consultation, and telepathology.<sup>14-17</sup>

In the histopathological report, it is recommended that we write the sentence "clinical correlation is recommended." This means that mere examination of the pathologic material (like histology, immunohistochemistry results, etc.) alone may not suffice. It must be correlated with the patient's clinical findings, chief complaint and presentation, relevant physical examination, and other relevant additional tests such as biochemistry results, and imaging studies (like CT scan, MRI, etc.) under the context of a "multidisciplinary team (MDT)" approach in the evaluation and management of patients. All this in combination leads to a much better understanding of the disease, its conclusive diagnosis, and most significantly, correct management and treatment can be achieved.<sup>18</sup>

## Patient Protection and Right to Privacy from Social Media

Few guidelines have been issued by American Medical Association (AMA) protecting patient privacy for clinicians using social media.<sup>19</sup> But there are no such guidelines given for dentists in India. Although, it is unethical to share any patient-related information on social media, authors still, find few dentist-sharing posts. It is recommended not to share details of patients, radiographs, histopathology slide images and case-related information on any social media where patient identity is compromised.

## Histopathological Tissue and Research Ethics

The oral pathologist should be aware of the fact that the patient has the right to the tissue and the information based on their testing. The pathology department or lab is considered the legal caretaker of the tissue. The pathologist cannot deny a patient the right to tissues as he or she has the right to a second opinion and is the owner of the tissue and tissue block. Furthermore, oral pathologists are ethically obliged to take permission from the patient for using tissues for research purposes.<sup>14,17</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Most practicing dentists are not aware of all the ethical guidelines given by the Dental Council of India and the Indian Dental Association. Therefore, as an additional topic, dental ethics should be part of the curriculum and guidelines should be taught in one of the final year semesters. This way, students who are going to be dentists will be well-versed in ethics, morals and their duties. Senior faculties of universities and colleges can take the initiative to teach about ethics by conducting a "continuing dental education" CDE program. All oral and maxillofacial pathologists must know, understand and follow the ethical guidelines.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None

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