



# CODE OF ETHICS

## **Preamble**

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Medical students have a privileged place in the medical setting, where their chief aim is to learn from patients and health professionals. Since this raises unique ethical considerations, AMSA, as the representative body of medical students in Australia, saw a need to develop a specific Code of Ethics. The process began with the Health Promotion and Ethics Committee in 2000/2001, and has involved wide consultation among medical students and externally.

Ethical conduct is integral to effective professional practice, and thus is an essential component of a medical education. This Code is not prescriptive, but reflects ethical standards to which medical students should aspire in their training. It is intended to encourage students to think and act ethically, that they might retain this outlook as medical professionals. The Code identifies eight 'Principles', each elaborated upon and clarified in a series of 'Annotations to the Principles'.

The Code is derived from such principles as beneficence, non-maleficence, justice and respect for autonomy. Although similar to other ethical codes in medicine, it seeks to reflect values that underpin contemporary medical education. The Code complements obligations and responsibilities laid down for medical students by universities and the relevant clinical institutions.

This document was formally ratified by the AMSA Council in September 2003.

## **Principles**

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1. Medical students should respect the needs, values and culture of patients they encounter during their training.
2. Medical students should never exploit patients or their families.
3. Medical students should hold clinical information in confidence.
4. Medical students should obtain informed consent from patients before involving them in any aspect of training.
5. Medical students should appreciate the limits of their role in the clinical setting and in the community.
6. Medical students should respect the staff who teach and assist them in their clinical training.
7. Medical students involved in clinical research should adhere to the ethical principles in the appropriate national and international guidelines.

8. Medical students should maintain their personal integrity and well being

### **Annotations to the Principles**

#### **Principle 1**

*Medical students should respect the needs, values and culture of patients they encounter during their training.*

- 1.1. In all circumstances, medical students should respect the ethnicity, culture and religion of patients.
- 1.2. Medical students should not discriminate against patients on the basis of age, gender, race, sexual orientation, religion, creed, political affiliation and economic, social or health status.
- 1.3. Medical students should not impose their own values and beliefs upon patients.
- 1.4. Medical students should respect the autonomy of patients.
- 1.5. When appropriate, medical students should offer support to patients by listening, reassuring or providing information.

#### **Principle 2**

*Medical students should never exploit patients or their families..*

- 2.1. Medical students should never exploit patients for their own personal or financial benefit.
- 2.2. Medical students should not abuse the generosity of patients in their pursuit of learning. Medical students should have concern for the well being of patients above all else.
- 2.3. Medical students should not have sexual relations with or sexually harass patients.
- 2.4. Given the level of their skills, experience and knowledge, medical students should not represent themselves, or allow themselves to be represented, to patients or staff as a more competent or qualified member of the 'health care team'.

#### **Principle 3**

*Medical students should hold clinical information in confidence.*

- 3.1. Recognising that information held about patients is highly sensitive, medical students should hold all such information in confidence.
- 3.2. Medical students should respect patient's right to determine who should be provided with their personal information.
- 3.3. Information received about patients from other sources should also be held in confidence.
- 3.4. Information received from patients about other people should also be held in confidence.
- 3.5. This principle persists after a patient has ended treatment or died.
- 3.6. Medical students may discuss patient information with peers and professional staff, but patients should be informed of these limits of confidentiality.

- 3.7. Copies of medical records and student notes containing patient information should be kept in a secure place and destroyed when they are no longer required.
- 3.8. Confidentiality may be breached, rarely, if the welfare of the patient or other people is threatened.

#### **Principle 4**

*Medical students should obtain informed consent from patients before involving them in any aspect of training.*

- 4.1. Medical students should clearly inform patients of the purpose and nature of any proposed interaction with them.
- 4.2. Consent should be given freely and without coercion on the part of medical students or professional staff.
- 4.3. Medical students should inform patients that they may withdraw consent to medical student contact at any stage, without any compromise to their health care.
- 4.4. In tutorial settings, consent should be obtained from patients before medical students approach them as a group.
- 4.5. Where medical students are to perform a procedure or examination on an anaesthetised or sedated patient, informed consent should be obtained beforehand.
- 4.6. Where language, illness or other factors interfere with communication, medical students should make a special effort to ensure that the patient does reach the necessary level of understanding.

#### **Principle 5**

*Medical students should appreciate the limits of their role in the clinical setting and in the community.*

- 5.1. Medical students should not give advice or provide information, specific to patients or the general public, that is beyond their level of knowledge and expertise. When asked for such comment, medical students should refer the person to the professional staff responsible for treatment.
- 5.2. Medical students should not provide information relating to a patient's illness or prognosis that has not previously been explained by medical professionals responsible for the patient's care.
- 5.3. Except in an emergency, medical students should not initiate any form of treatment. They should instead recommend that people seek appropriate professional help.

#### **Principle 6**

*Medical students should respect the staff who teach and assist them in their clinical training.*

- 6.1. Medical students should respect doctors, nurses, allied health professionals and other members of the health care team.
- 6.2. Medical students should respect teachers for their effort and commitment to medical education.
- 6.3. Where medical students experience difficulty with staff, they should discuss this with their academic mentor or supervisor.

#### **Principle 7**

*Medical students involved in clinical research should adhere to the ethical principles found in international and national guidelines, and respect the well being of patients above all else.*

**Principle 8**

*Medical students should maintain their personal integrity and well being.*

- 8.1. Medical students should ensure that their physical and mental health enables them to relate effectively with patients and professional staff. In the event of illness or impairment that interferes with this role, they should obtain appropriate help and withdraw from patient contact.
- 8.2. Medical students are entitled to refuse to participate in any procedure that would violate their moral conscience.
- 8.3. Medical students should strive to improve the quality of their training by actively participating, alongside their teachers, in the planning and implementing of educational programmes.