PRINCIPLES OF MEDICAL PROFESSIONALISM: GUIDING VALUES AND DUTIES

About Principles of Medical Professionalism

The *Health Professions Procedural Code* under the *Regulated Health Professions Act, 1991* requires that the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario (CPSO) "develop, establish and maintain standards of professional ethics for [its] members."

Principles of Medical Professionalism sets out CPSO's expectations pertaining to professional ethics and articulates the values and duties at the core of medical practice. It is intended to provide broad guidance to CPSO members (the profession) and to inform patients, the public, and others what they can expect from the medical profession.

This resource is meant to guide professional judgment and behaviour by providing an overarching view of the standards the profession holds for itself and the expectations the public has of physicians, both individually and collectively.

Principles of Medical Professionalism and You

Providing quality care requires more than clinical competence; it involves upholding the standards of medical professionalism and, by extension, the social contract. The social contract is an agreement between the profession as a whole and the public it serves: in return for professional autonomy, the profession commits to upholding the values and duties of medical professionalism and to promoting the public good within its domain. *Principles of Medical Professionalism* sets out the ethical tenets of medical professionalism and can help physicians uphold them in their day-to-day practice.

The values and duties described in this resource inform the specific expectations set out in [CPSO policies](#) and work alongside these policies to help physicians deliver quality care for the people of Ontario. Together with CPSO policies, relevant legislation, and case law, *Principles of Medical Professionalism* will be used by CPSO as a benchmark when considering or evaluating physician practice and conduct.

Conflict among the values and duties outlined in this resource may occur, and in such situations, physicians will need to use their best judgment on how to proceed.

What is Medical Professionalism?

In medicine, professionalism consists of <u>the words and actions of physicians that foster trust and respect with patients, colleagues[i], and the public</u>.

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[i] In *Principles of Medical Professionalism*, the term "colleague" is used to refer to physicians; other health care professionals; hospital or clinic administrative, ancillary, and support staff; medical students, interns, residents; and anyone involved in the provision of health care.

Trust and respect are the core values of the medical profession. In the delivery of competent care, physicians foster trust and respect by:

- Practising with **integrity**
- Committing to **responsibility**
- Practising with **humility**
- Recognising and honouring their **humanity** and the humanity of those they interact with

Practising with Integrity

For physicians, having integrity means practising within the guidelines and standards of the profession. It means making sound clinical and behavioural judgments and acting in good faith for the benefit of patients even in challenging situations.

Physicians demonstrate integrity in their work with patients by:

- Considering each patient's well-being and acting in their best interest
- Committing to providing the best possible quality of care to patients
- Maintaining professional boundaries with patients and persons closely associated with patients
- Avoiding conflicts of interest and safeguarding their professional independence
- Protecting the privacy of patient's personal health information
- Communicating honestly with patients

Physicians demonstrate integrity in their work with colleagues by:

- Working together even when their personal beliefs and/or professional opinions differ
- Raising concerns about a colleague's inappropriate, unprofessional, or otherwise concerning behaviour directly with that colleague (or, if needed, escalating the concerns to the relevant leadership or authority) in a manner that does not compromise their own safety

Physicians demonstrate integrity in their work with the public by:

- Preserving the reputation of the profession
    - Engaging in respectful public debate
    - Putting forward evidence-informed viewpoints
    - Using social media responsibly and in a way that upholds the standards of the profession
- Maintaining the standard of care

Committing to Responsibility

For physicians, committing to responsibility means understanding what is reasonably expected of them and striving to meet those expectations. It also means recognizing the different groups to whom physicians are responsible. Though their primary responsibilities are always to their patients and their patients' best interests, physicians are also collectively responsible to each other, to others involved in health-care delivery, and to the public they serve.

Physicians demonstrate responsibility in their work with patients by:

- Providing safe, competent care
  - Keeping skills and knowledge up to date
  - Recommending treatments and interventions informed by evidence and scientific reasoning
- Advocating for individual patients
  - Facilitating continuity of care by helping patients navigate the health-care system
  - Promoting health equity and working to address the social determinants of health impacting patients
- Communicating effectively with patients and their family members, loved ones, caregivers, or substitute decision-makers
  - Striving to ensure that patients understand the nature and significance of their condition and the treatment options available to them
  - Answering any questions patients have about their condition and/or treatment options

Physicians demonstrate responsibility in their work with colleagues by:

- Promoting open channels for feedback from colleagues and other care providers
- Recognizing and fulfilling their obligations in the context of team-based care
- Modelling respect, appropriate conduct, and healthy collegial relationships in the workplace

Physicians demonstrate responsibility in their work with the public by:

- Embracing social accountability
  - Recognizing and, where possible, addressing community and population health needs
  - Promoting equitable access to health care and social supports
- Practising in a manner that promotes and protects public health
- Recognizing the power and role of respectful, evidence-based physician advocacy
- Fulfilling reporting obligations
- Practising effective resource stewardship

Practising with Humility

For physicians, being humble involves acknowledging the inherent vulnerability of patients and recognizing the power imbalance between physicians and patients. By practising with and showing humility, physicians accept that achieving the best outcomes for patients is an ongoing process nurtured through collaboration and engagement with others.

Physicians can practise with and show humility in their work with patients by:

- Undertaking lifelong learning in clinical knowledge, communication, and leadership (e.g., active listening, de-escalation, and conflict resolution)
- Recognizing when there is a gap in their knowledge (clinical or otherwise) and working to remedy that gap

- Showing cultural humility while working with all patients and their family members, loved ones, caregivers, or substitute decision-makers
    - Learning about and respecting patients' lived experiences, values, and beliefs
- Providing inclusive, culturally appropriate, and safe care
    - Asking patients about their preferences regarding the care they receive
- Enabling and empowering patients to be partners in their care
    - Engaging in shared decision-making and patient-centred care
    - Welcoming and accepting the views of patients and their families, loved ones, caregivers, and substitute decision-makers
    - Encouraging patients to be proactive in maintaining their own health and well-being
- Seeking to understand what an illness *means* for a patient and their families, not just what the illness is

Physicians practise with and show humility in their work with colleagues by:

- Being open and receptive to the views and feedback of colleagues and other providers
- Seeking help and support from colleagues and other providers, when needed
- Supporting and mentoring colleagues
- Managing conflict with colleagues in a productive, dignified, and safe manner
    - Reflecting on one's role in the conflict
- Expressing gratitude for the contributions of colleagues and other care providers

Physicians practise with and show humility in their work with the public by:

- Participating in collaborative, team-based, and patient-centred models of care

Recognizing and Honouring Humanity

By honouring their own humanity and the humanity of others, physicians create the foundations for trusting, respectful, and empathetic relationships.

For physicians, honouring humanity means recognizing the inherent value and dignity of all people, including themselves, and keeping the varied experiences of patients at the centre of health care delivery. It also means acknowledging that physicians and other care providers themselves need care and compassion in order to provide effective and sustainable care. In the practice of medicine, recognizing and honouring humanity means caring for people, not simply treating diseases.

Physicians honour their own humanity by:

- Acknowledging their physical and social needs, vulnerabilities, and limitations
- Demonstrating self-compassion in the face of personal pain and moral injury
- Taking time away from work, when possible
- Recognizing personal impairment or decline
- Asking for help from colleagues and making use of available wellness resources, when necessary

Physicians honour the humanity of their patients by:

- Respecting the autonomy of their patients
- Learning about and employing trauma-informed approaches to care
- Reflecting on their own implicit and unconscious biases
- Fostering welcoming and inclusive spaces for everyone
- Using patients' preferred names, titles, and pronouns
- Recognizing the unique experiences, opportunities, and barriers created by each person's intersecting social identities (i.e., race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, and/or religion).
    - Where possible, striving to address the discrimination faced by patients from marginalized and underrepresented populations

Physicians honour the humanity of their colleagues by:

- Recognizing the individual needs and lived experiences of colleagues and other care providers
- Modelling kindness, ethical care, and compassion for colleagues, staff, and other care providers
- Fostering an emotionally and physically safe workplace that is conducive to the delivery of quality health care

Physicians honour the humanity of the public by:

- Bringing an intersectional lens to their daily processes and practices
- Committing to allyship and striving to address discrimination and oppression in health care

Professional Duties and Regulation

Collectively, physicians have been granted the privilege of profession-led regulation. Preserving this privilege requires the profession to maintain an effective and appropriate governance structure and a reliable system of accountability. This means it is not enough for individual physicians to accept regulation; each physician has a professional duty to actively participate in the regulatory process.

Physicians participate in profession-led regulation by:

- Engaging with CPSO, as necessary
- Cooperating with CPSO during investigations, as required by legislation
    - Disclosing information relevant to investigations
- Being open to remediation
- Maintaining familiarity with [CPSO policies](#)
- Participating in quality improvement opportunities when they are offered

Looking Forward

Principles of Medical Professionalism has been developed for Ontario physicians and the Ontario public and articulates what values and duties the medical profession holds for itself. These values and duties are exhibited every day in physicians' offices, clinics, hospitals, and

anywhere health care is delivered across the province. While physicians continue to strive to fulfill these professional duties in their day-to-day practice, they are not expected to take on responsibility for the health system alone. Rather, by practising with these values and duties in mind, physicians, in their daily individual encounters with patients and colleagues, can and will continue to positively contribute to the health of the system, the profession, and the public.