

## Ethical Guidelines for Ophthalmologists: Ethical Principles and Professional Standards

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This International Council of Ophthalmology (ICO) document comprises a set of moral principles and standards to guide the behavior of ophthalmologists within their professional domain, extending the ethical code of the World Medical Association <http://www.wma.net/en/30publications/10policies/c8/>. The Guidelines reflect the ideals to which ophthalmologists should aspire as members of a specialist branch of the medical profession and as socially responsible members of their respective professional societies.

Each of the nine standards that follow includes a general *principle* from which the related *standards* evolve. The standards taken together are intended to represent comprehensive guidelines to which practitioners might refer when confronted with professional or ethical dilemmas, and to act as a benchmark by which to judge behavior in professional matters. Standards may be added over time in response to eventualities, but the principles remain immutable.

### Standards

1. Patient Care Standards
2. Professional Practice Standards
3. Professional Community Standards
4. Standards for Working with Other Health Care Professionals
5. Research Standards
6. Social Standards
7. Commercial Standards
8. Teaching and Mentorship Standards
9. Standards Governing the Relationship to the Medical Industry

## 1. Patient Care Standards

### 1.1 General Principle

Good patient care depends upon medical and technical expertise, clinical decision-making, communication and teamwork, and health advocacy. The ophthalmologist ought to ensure that patients are treated with dignity, honesty, and integrity, and must act in the best interests of the patient at all times.

### 1.2 Standards

The ophthalmologist ought to:

- Act in the best interests of his/her patient
- Put a patient's health and care above all other considerations
- Provide prompt help to persons whose life or health is endangered by disease or accident within their scope of competence
- Treat patients without discriminating on the basis of age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, insurance status, disability, religion, lifestyle, or culture
- Ensure the privacy of the patient, and maintain confidentiality in all aspects of the patient's treatment within the confines of the law
- Obtain informed consent from the patient for all interventions
- Provide the patient with truthful and accurate information about the state of the patient's health.

## 2. Professional Practice Standards

### 2.1 General Principle

The ophthalmologist ought to ensure that ophthalmic care is of the highest quality possible.

### 2.2 Standards

The ophthalmologist ought to:

- Perform only those procedures in which he/she is competent by reason of specific training or experience, or be assisted by someone with specific training or experience in said procedures.
- Maintain competence in technical ability, cognitive knowledge, and professionalism, keeping abreast of developments in ophthalmic practice
- Be actively participating in clinical and surgical audit activities
- Anchor innovation and science with moral values
- Refrain from misrepresentation of credentials, training, experience, or ability
- Find the best quality care for the patient's condition, including appropriate referrals as required
- Ensure a culture of operative safety for patients, including implementing an approved "Surgical Safety Checklist"

- Maintain accurate records of relevant information about the patient and his/her state of health
- Be appropriately dressed to meet the requirements for hygiene and courtesy
- Respect laws, ethical guidelines, and religious beliefs on the use of donated human tissue
- Respect local variations in medical practice and customs, provided these do not contravene the ethical standards
- Endeavor to minimize the cost and effort required by the patient to comply with the entire care cycle
- Refrain from or withdraw from engaging in any form of clinical practice that might be compromised in the case of a physician's mental, emotional, or physical impairment
- Take corrective action when aware that an impaired ophthalmologist is behaving in a compromised manner, including notifying the appropriate authorities.

### 2.3 Patient Relationships

The ophthalmologist ought to:

- Respect the wishes of the patient
- Seek to effectively communicate with the patient, relatives, caregivers, or legal guardians
- Be sensitive and aware that different beliefs, backgrounds, values, and cultures may influence a patient's understanding, decisions, or responses
- Discuss the patient's diagnosis, investigations, and treatment in a way the patient can understand
- Provide the patient with a recommendation based on clinical need
- Provide opportunities for the patient, relatives, caregivers, or legal guardians to ask questions
- Be open and honest, particularly when the patient has suffered a complication or adverse event
- Refer a patient when the best procedure for the patient is not within the ophthalmologist's scope of practice
- Maintain the confidentiality of all information divulged by the patient or obtained from the patient (eg, radiology, photographs, pathology results) unless otherwise required by law or agreed to by the patient
- Refrain from entering into a relationship of a sexual nature with the patient.

## 3. Professional Community Standards

### 3.1 General Principle

The ophthalmologist ought to be a responsible member of their professional community by maintaining standards, promoting public awareness of eye care issues, advocating for improvements in the health care system for the benefit of

patients, particularly in areas where inequality exists, and by avoiding conduct that would bring the ophthalmologic community and its members into disrepute.

### 3.2 Standards

The ophthalmologist ought to:

- Abide by the law, but also recognize a responsibility to seek to alter those laws and regulations that do not serve the best interests of patients
- Support the transparent and equitable allocation of health care resources
- Advocate for improvements in individual and public health where appropriate.

## 4. Standards for Working with Other Health Care Professionals

### 4.1 General Principle

Safe and effective patient care involves ophthalmologists working in partnership with surgeons and all members of the eye care team, and in respecting the knowledge and views of all team members.

### 4.2 Standards

The ophthalmologist ought to:

- Treat colleagues with respect
- Respect the training, knowledge, and experience of other surgeons and health care workers
- Participate constructively in peer review
- Maintain a respectful professional dialogue conducted in a manner that advances the best interests of the patient, including the sharing of relevant information
- Provide help to colleagues in cases where professional standards of care are below available possibilities
- Respect the interests of the referring physician when asked for a consultation or a second opinion
- Refrain from acting as an expert witness in legal cases unless one can do so truthfully
- Decide freely and responsibly whether, and to which colleagues, to transfer patients for specialized diagnostics and therapy
- Reject any influence of third parties on the referral patterns.

## 5. Research Standards

### 5.1 General Principle

Ophthalmologists should be conscious of and observe the ethical, legal, and scientific criteria for medical research. Research, by its nature, carries a risk of unknown adverse events from the interventions being trialed. Patients should be advised of any known risks, and risks to the patient should be minimized. Any

research involving patients or human material should be reviewed by an appropriate ethics committee.

## 5.2 Standards

The ophthalmologist ought to:

- Perform research under the aegis of an accredited ethics research committee where appropriate
- Observe appropriate review mechanisms for clinical research
- Inform research subjects of the nature of the investigation, and obtain full informed written consent
- Regard the well-being of the individual patient as paramount, irrespective of the value of the research project
- Ensure that patients retain the right to withdraw from research at any time and are provided with feedback about their treatment without prejudice.
- Refrain from representing another's work as their own
- Report research accurately and avoid conflict of interest.

## 6. Social Standards

### 6.1 General Principle

The ophthalmologist ought to ensure that communications to the public reflect the ophthalmologist's social responsibilities and reflect the highest level of probity; the ophthalmologist should not vaunt his/her skill or advertise himself/herself as the unique purveyor of treatment.

### 6.2 Standards

The ophthalmologist ought to:

- Communicate accurately with the public
- Refrain from misrepresentation of credentials, training, experience, or ability
- Refrain from providing false, deceptive, or misleading information
- Refrain from misleading through omission of material information
- Refrain from appealing to an individual's anxiety in an unfair way for self-benefit.

## 7. Commercial Standards

### 7.1 General Principle

Doctors have traditionally enjoyed respect and trust from the communities in which they practice. Ophthalmologists ought to display standards of ethical behavior that warrant this respect and trust. It is a professional responsibility to make the patient's interests paramount when providing advice, opinion, or intervention.

### 7.2 Standards

The ophthalmologist ought to:

- When charging a fee for professional services
  - Ensure that it is reasonable and does not exploit the patient's need
  - Disclose fees without misrepresentation, including future costs to be incurred as part of treatment
  - Disclose to the patient any relevant interest in or of a third party
- Be honest and transparent with respect to any potential conflicts of interest
- Be honest in financial and commercial matters
- Recommend only those tests, devices, drugs, or procedures that advance the best interest of the patient, rather than serve the financial benefit of the ophthalmologist.
- Declare relevant financial interest, including company sponsorship in diagnostic and procedural services, used to manage patients.

## 8. Teaching and Mentorship Standards

### 8.1 General Principle

Ophthalmologists have achieved their professional status due to the teaching of others before them. Ophthalmologists have a duty to pass on their knowledge to the next generation to ensure that the profession continues to advance and offer the best treatment available to patients. Ophthalmologists should play an active role in training the next generation of ophthalmologists, where feasible, whether trainees, undergraduates, or newly qualified colleagues. Ophthalmologists recognize that they have a professional responsibility to supervise, teach, and act as role models for the up-and-coming generation of practitioners.

### 8.2 Standards

The ophthalmologist ought to:

- Provide supervision that minimizes risks to the patient and maintains responsibility for the patient's welfare
- Acknowledge the responsibility to teach and train future ophthalmologists, junior doctors, medical students, and where applicable, allied health or midlevel eye care personnel
- Encourage teaching of medical ethics
- Commit to providing team training
- Give feedback on progress and performance, including assisting in remediation programs where necessary
- Encourage self-assessment and reflection through clinical/surgical audit
- Be honest, factual, objective, and constructive when providing feedback
- Act as a professional coach to colleagues by providing the opportunity for open and impartial dialogue and advice on professional matters, or on practices that might hinder professional and ethical behavior

- Assist in ensuring trainees are safe in the workplace, with regard to their own physical, mental, and emotional health, including ensuring all trainees have access if possible to a mentor program.

## 9. Standards Governing the Relationship to the Medical Industry

### 9.1 General Principle

Ophthalmologists recognize that the medical industry can play a crucial role in contributing to increasing quality of drugs, techniques, distribution, research, and many other areas of the continued development of the profession and the quality of care available to patients. Ophthalmologists also realize that it may be dangerous to have too dependent a relationship with purveyors of materials and other professional tools and medications. Ethical conduct in working with the medical industry should ensure that the interest of the patient and the needs of the community are best served by any relationship that may exist between the supplier and the practitioner.

### 9.2 Standards

The ophthalmologist ought to:

- Ensure that the use of new medications, machinery, and other support from the medical industry is primarily motivated by care and consideration of the patient's needs and are not recommended as a means of garnering financial recompense
- Take precautions to ensure that all recommended treatment or interventions suggested by medical industries, or representatives of medical industries, have been approved by the required process and laws of the land
- Ensure that the appropriate ethical clearance has been obtained for clinical trials as recommended in the Helsinki Declaration—Ethical Principles for Medical Research Involving Human Subjects  
<http://www.wma.net/en/30publications/10policies/b3/>
- Ensure that patients will not be used in trials in the introduction of new processes or medications without their express permission after clear, explicit, and truthful presentation of the procedure, its risks, and the patient's expected role in the process
- Maintain complete secrecy of files, databases, or other patient-related information, and under no circumstance, reveal such data to companies or other commercial interests for the purpose of advertising or contacting the said patient for commercial gain
- Be cautious in accepting direct funding from the medical industry. It is preferable that such funding is through an independent body, such as a professional society or hospital that will award the funds to the most appropriate individual
- Be open in identifying those who are responsible for funding or sponsoring

- scientific or other ophthalmology-related events
- Clarify that no partiality or benefit is attached to a funding agent and that no funding agent is accorded special rights or preferential treatment as a result of their sponsorship
- Orient ophthalmological training towards evidence-based knowledge and not the interest of external bodies
- Ensure that sponsors are not allowed to influence the content of ophthalmologic presentations
- Ensure that fees and reimbursement of expenses are only given based on the performance of a professionally related task, and not on defending the interests of sponsoring bodies or funding agencies.

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