

Talking Ethics



The Necessary Steps to Being Culturally Competent

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Society's mores change over time as the values and attitudes of the public evolve. Governments create legislation and policies that reflect these deeply held values to meet the needs of the public. They communicate their intentions through various departments and ministries to regulatory authorities and boards. As self-regulated primary health care providers to Canadians of all races and ethnicities, dental hygienists are mandated to be culturally competent, avoid discrimination, and put the needs of their clients and students first.

This issue of *Oh Canada!* explores many facets of cultural competence. According to Darby and Walsh,¹ cultural competence involves awareness of one's own biases or prejudices and is rooted in respect for, validation of, and openness to differences. The culturally competent regulated dental hygienist views all clients or students as unique individuals and is aware that experiences, beliefs, values, and language affect the overall outcome¹ of care/education.

SELF-REFLECTION: WHAT BIASES DO I HAVE?

Do you stereotype or label, or are you biased against an ethnic group, a religious group, members of the LGBT community, divorced singles or families with two mothers or two fathers? As regulated health professionals, dental hygienists are required by government and regulatory authorities to address and move past personal biases.

Health professionals should reflect on their own feelings and assumptions and assess their reactions and biases, as well as potential gaps in their knowledge.² This awareness informs your praxis and could prevent you from committing a discriminatory act against a person, group or community.

LEGALLY SPEAKING

Discrimination, an action or a decision that treats a person or a group unfairly,³ is against the law in Canada. The Canadian Human Rights Act (1985) stipulates that all individuals should have the opportunity to a life free of discriminatory practices based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, marital status, family status, genetic characteristics, disability or pardonable convictions.⁴

ETHICALLY SPEAKING

The *Dental Hygienists' Code of Ethics* articulates the knowledge, skill, and judgement expected of dental hygienists in Canada.⁵ **Beneficence** is the ethical principle that requires dental hygienists to provide services to clients (and students) in a caring manner with respect for their individual needs, values, culture, safety, and life circumstances, and in recognition of their inherent dignity.^{5 p5} **Accountability** is the ethical principle that requires dental hygienists to accept responsibility for knowing and acting in accordance with the principles,

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practice standards, laws, and regulations under which they are accountable.^{5 p8} An important resource found in the Code is “Appendix B: Guidelines for ethical decision making”, an 8-step model designed to assist dental hygienists in facing and resolving ethical challenges.^{5 pp11-12}

PRACTICALLY SPEAKING

Health care providers must recognize their legal obligation to provide safe and inclusive care to all.² An oral health professional is obligated to practise culturally competent care by respecting the individual needs and values of their clients and students.⁶ Cross-cultural training is fundamental; be an advocate for diversity and inclusion; use language that is inclusive and not discriminatory.⁷ Understanding the impact of stigma and one’s ability to demonstrate empathy through awareness and validation is critical to establishing a trusting client–provider relationship.² Some beneficial strategies are self-reflection, journaling, and discussion with your peers.

PROFESSIONALLY SPEAKING

Our profession has recognized the importance of cultural competency by adding the practice of **cultural humility**, defined as “a process of self-reflection to understand personal and systemic conditioned biases and to develop and maintain respectful processes and relationships based on mutual trust”^{8 p15} to the *Entry-to-Practice Canadian Competencies for Dental Hygienists*.

The Canadian Dental Hygienists Association (CDHA) has identified the importance of cross-cultural training for its members. As a result, its 2022 Summit in Whitehorse, Yukon (September 30–October 1) has been designed to support efforts to build culturally safe practices and health-promoting relationships with all people who access dental hygiene services. Sessions will help dental hygienists discover how cultural safety and humility, diversity, equity, and inclusion influence dental hygiene practice.⁹

What is your next step towards cultural competency? Is it advocating for the rights of your client, groups of people or communities? Is it taking advantage of professional development activities or using the ethical decision-making model? Will you register for CDHA’s 2022 Summit? Regardless of which steps you take, remember that society benefits from your continued competence and cultural competence in action.

References

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