

Talking Ethics



Professionalism and Ethics During the COVID-19 Pandemic

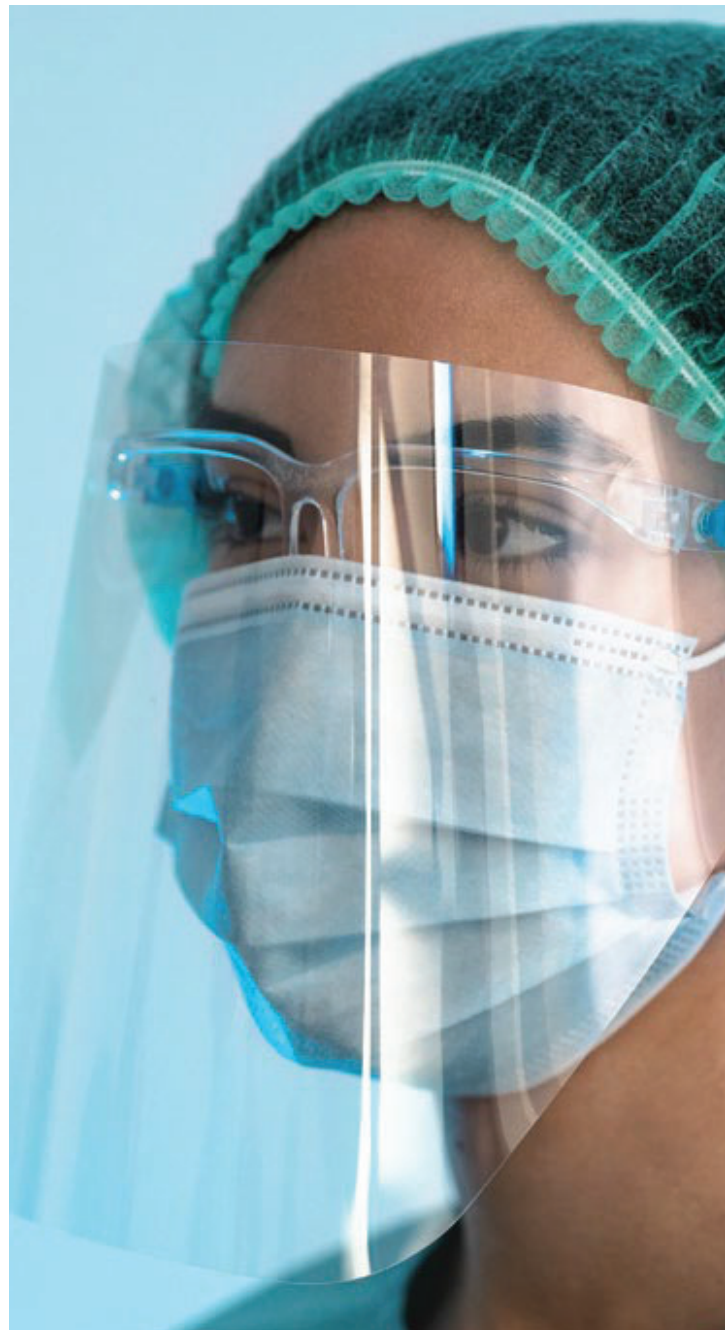
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There is nothing normal about life right now. Some parts of the world are open for business, some have limitations and safety restrictions in place, and others are in complete lockdowns with various industries closed until further notice. We as oral health professionals are already accustomed to very strict infection control standards, but even we have stepped it up a notch: now donning N95s, face shields, and very fashionable bouffants. However, staying healthy—both physically and mentally—has taken on more meaning than ever before. Many of us are struggling to keep our heads above water.

Our conversations with friends, family, and clients are dominated by the pandemic. We are bombarded on social media with posts about statistics, vaccinations, and now even variant strains of the virus. With vaccines being administered in Canada, you may be wondering when everyone will be eligible to receive it and may be having conversations with your clients about how they feel about the vaccine. Excited. Relieved. Skeptical. Scared. What is your role as a health care provider to educate your clients? How do we remain professional and ethical when we ourselves may be experiencing myriad emotions almost a year into this pandemic?

As registered dental hygienists, we are subject to rules and restrictions, including those relating to advertising and social media. The regulatory bodies enforce these restrictions to protect the public from false or misleading information and to prevent conduct that reflects poorly on their professions. As Rosen Sunshine LLP states, “The need for caution with regard to what information is provided by health professionals to the public is heightened in a public health emergency where the public is looking to the medical community for guidance regarding COVID-19. Several regulatory colleges have reminded their members to avoid making any statements or claims regarding COVID-19 that are not verifiable, and in particular, any claims which contradict public health and government guidelines.”¹

In Ontario, physicians are reminded to be aware of how their actions on social media or through other forms of communication may be viewed, especially during a pandemic. Your comments or actions too can lead to harm if you are providing an opinion that does not align with information from public health officials and all levels of government. It is essential that the public receive a consistent and clear message.



Continued...

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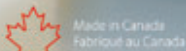


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²John A. Molnar, Ph.D., Paul Nelson, B.S., Antonio Molnar, Environmental Surface Wellness Test: Comparison of Disinfectant Wipes, Ann Arbor, Dental Advisor, 2016. ³John A. Molnar, Ph.D., Paul Nelson, B.S., and Davi J.V. Raghavan, B.Sc., OPTIM 1 Environmental Surface Cleaning Investigation, Ann Arbor, Dental Advisor, 2016. ⁴Don't good to be too! Read our Safety Data Sheet at www.scican.com/products/scican-disinfectants/optim-1. ⁵John A. Molnar, Ph.D., Paul Nelson, B.S. Effect of OPTIM 1 on Sensible Properties of Dental Chair Fabrics, Ann Arbor, Dental Advisor, 2016.
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*Professionalism and Ethics During the COVID-19 Pandemic...cont'd***SO WHAT CAN YOU DO?**

- It is imperative that dental hygienists undertake their due diligence to critically appraise information and rely on evidence-based, credible sources, as opposed to second- or third-hand information, when making determinations or recommendations.
- Avoid making statements or providing opinions that promote fear, contradict public health recommendations or are otherwise not in line with professional standards and guidelines. This would include unverified claims about potential treatments or preventive measures for COVID-19.
- When speaking to clients about COVID-19 or vaccines, draw on guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the United States, which has an excellent resource entitled *Engaging in Effective COVID-19 Vaccine Conversations*.² According to the CDC, there are 4 key things to keep in mind during such conversations:

1. Start from a place of empathy and understanding.
2. Assume patients will want to be vaccinated but may not know when to expect it.
3. Give your strong recommendation.
4. Listen to and respond to patient questions.²

According to CDHA's *Dental Hygienists' Code of Ethics*³, dental hygienists' primary responsibility is to the client and community. The ethical principle of beneficence very much applies in the time of a pandemic; caring about and acting to promote the good of another, as well as assisting clients to achieve and maintain optimal oral health and overall well-being are paramount.

Educate yourself with current information so that you can answer your clients' questions. In addition, refer them to reputable sites for information that can deepen their understanding. The CDC and Government of Canada websites are excellent sources:

- www.cdc.gov/
- www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/prevention-risks.html

**References**

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2. National Center for Immunizations and Respiratory Diseases. *Making a Strong Recommendation for COVID-19 Vaccination: Engaging in Effective COVID-19 Vaccine Conversations* [Internet]. c2020 [cited 2021 Feb 5]. Available from: www.cdc.gov/vaccines/covid-19/hcp/engaging-patients.html
3. Canadian Dental Hygienists Association. *Dental hygienists' code of ethics*. Ottawa, ON: CDHA; 2012 [cited 2021 Feb 5]. Available from: www.cdha.ca/pdfs/Profession/Resources/Code_of_Ethics_EN_web.pdf