

Talking Ethics



Dental Radiographs: Rights and Responsibilities

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There are many questions that the dental hygienist should consider when exposing clients to radiation. When a radiograph is prescribed, the dental hygienist must understand why the radiograph is necessary, how many radiographs are required, how much exposure to radiation the client will receive, and if the client has received radiation exposure recently from other medical procedures. Do the risks outweigh the benefits? We, as dental professionals, ask ourselves many questions because we must then explain to the client why the radiographs are required, why they are important to the provision of care, and then obtain consent to proceed.

What are the ethical concerns associated with taking radiographs and the client's right to refuse to have them taken? Clients are often hesitant to have radiographs taken at dental appointments, which can cause dental hygienists grief when they are needed for diagnostic purposes. The clients may be concerned about the amount of radiation from the radiographs, the number of radiographs performed routinely, whether they are for a specific dental concern or diagnostic purpose, and the cost of the radiographs. Dental hygienists understand the clinical importance of radiographs but often struggle with knowing how they can best make clients understand.

The principle of beneficence in the *Dental Hygienists' Code of Ethics* states that "Dental hygienists recommend or provide those services that they believe are necessary for promoting and maintaining a client's oral health..."¹ It is therefore the responsibility of the dental hygienist to ensure that the client recognizes the value of radiographs when they are prescribed for specific diagnostic reasons. When dental hygienists help the client understand the reasons for taking the radiograph, as well as the process and the safeguards in place for reducing radiation exposure, they can alleviate the client's apprehensions and make receiving consent easier. If we follow the guidelines on consent for treatment, a dental hygienist must provide all the relevant information about the process that a reasonable person would require in deciding to have the radiographs taken. The client must have the procedure explained in a language

or format they understand. They must be informed about the diagnosis, alternative options, the risks involved, and the prognosis if the client refuses. The client must be given an opportunity to ask questions and discuss any concerns.

Dental hygienists must also make sure that clients are aware they have the right to refuse radiographs. The principle of beneficence states that "Dental hygienists regard informed choice as a precondition of intervention, and honour a client's informed choice including refusal of intervention."¹ Consent cannot be forced on any client. If the client does refuse a radiograph, the dental hygienist must explain the risks associated with the refusal. The refusal must be documented, including the information provided to the client by the dental hygienist in response to the client's refusal.²



CONCLUSION

Follow the best practice guidelines on radiation exposure and consent for treatment from your provincial regulatory body. The provinces and territories have different regulations with regards to dental hygienists' prescribing, exposing, and interpreting radiographs. Be aware of what the regulations are in the province or territory where you provide services. Finally, always remember to apply the principle of beneficence in your conversations with clients about the importance of radiographs for their oral health.

References

1. Canadian Dental Hygienists Association. *Dental hygienists' code of ethics*. Ottawa: Author; 2012.
2. Wyche CJ. *The dental hygiene care plan*. In Wilkins EA. *Clinical practice of the dental hygienist*, 9th ed. Baltimore, MD: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins; 2004. pp 369–70.