

# Introduction

## Part 1

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## 1

# Principles of dental practice

Dental practice has been carried out for over 7000 years, and there is evidence of dentistry being practised around the River Indus at that time. From 2600 BC, there are records of the Egyptians practising dentistry, making prostheses and carrying out oral surgery. The purpose of dental practice has, since its inception, been very similar. What has changed over time is the equipment, techniques and materials available to practitioners, and patients' desires and expectations.

## The key principles

The key GDC principles are given in Box 1.1.

### Box 1.1 The principles of practice in dentistry

As a dental professional, you are responsible for doing the following.

- 1 Put patients' interests first
- 2 Communicate effectively with patients
- 3 Obtain valid consent
- 4 Maintain and protect patients' information
- 5 Have a clear and effective complaints procedure
- 6 Work with colleagues in a way that is in patients' best interests
- 7 Maintain, develop and work within your professional knowledge and skills
- 8 Raise concerns if patients are at risk
- 9 Make sure your personal behaviour maintains patients' confidence in you and the dental profession

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The ethics of a profession is a complex area as it encompasses the views of the profession and those of the society which it serves. These may change over time. Some professional ethics are very obvious, for example the relief of a patient's dental pain should be the first objective for dentists treating patients. However, other issues, which have an ethical dimension, may change based on society's views. For example, there is a dilemma over the ethics of the provision of treatments simply to improve the appearance of teeth. Another major challenge to general practitioners is how to earn a living by providing care to patients whilst maintaining ethical professional standards. Dentists could provide treatments because the patient requests it, so long as it is feasible. The dentist could charge a higher fee, rather than offer a patient a simpler lower-cost procedure. Such decisions are not a simple matter of right or wrong. Ethics and professional standards are important as they provide a 'litmus test' to assist a practitioner decide what they should do. Asking the question 'can the proposed treatment be supported?', if reviewed against the GDC's key standards, is critical to providing appropriate care.

## The purpose of dental practice in more detail

**1 Relief of pain to patients** – types of pain in the mouth in order of prevalence is:

- Sensitivity to cold and sweet, which is often due to loss of dentine around the cervical margin of teeth
- Pain from within a tooth – inflamed dental pulp tissues – which is reversible or irreversible
- Pain from the bone around and under a tooth with an abscess
- Pain from unhealthy gums or infection of the gums, gingivitis, periodontitis, e.g. acute ulcerative gingivitis
- Pain from ulcers of the soft tissues of the mouth
- Pain arising within the nervous system of the mouth, e.g. trigeminal neuralgia, psychogenic pain
- Pain from oral cancer
- Pain referred to the jaws, e.g. angina.

**2 Restore function of the oral tissues** so that patients can eat, drink and socialise as they require. Options are:

- Remove the painful or mobile tooth – extraction
- Restore the tooth with fillings or crowns, with or without root fillings
- Replace missing teeth with removable prostheses (e.g. dentures) or fixed prosthesis (e.g. bridges and dental implant retained crowns)
- Provision of orthodontics to straighten teeth to improve the function and appearance
- Provision of tooth whitening and other procedures to improve the aesthetics of the teeth.

**3 Provide advice and treatments to prevent further dental disease:**

- Advice on diet and frequency of consumption of sugar and acid drinks
- Advice on tooth pastes, mouth washes and cleaning of teeth, including interdentally, gum margins and the tongue
- Advice on lifestyle issues – smoking, alcohol consumption
- Procedures to reduce the chance of dental decay, e.g. the application of high-concentration fluoride varnishes, gels and fissure sealants

The object of these interventions is the promotion and maintenance of dental and oral health.

**4 Promotion of the oral health of the community** – dentists may be involved in dental health promotion in their community. This might be talks to schools and other groups, encouragement of local authorities to add fluoride to water, education of staff who care for patients (e.g. in residential and nursing homes), oral cancer awareness months, etc.

## The key points

- Dentistry can – relieve pain, restore function, improve appearance, give individual and societal advice on promoting oral and general health
- The delivery of care is defined by professional clinical standards and professional standards which are in turn based on professional ethics and the wishes of the society it serves. These are determined by society in consultation with the profession.