



Alberta College of Dental Hygienists

Guidelines for Dental Hygienists in Alberta

Code of Ethics

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The Alberta College of Dental Hygienists (the College) provides guidelines to support dental hygienists in understanding and meeting their legislated requirements, standards of practice, and code of ethics. Guidelines establish professionally accepted means by which dental hygienists can achieve compliance with the College's standards.

Failing to comply with a guideline may be considered unprofessional conduct if the dental hygienist did not achieve compliance with the standard, or if the departure from the guideline compromises the quality of dental hygiene services or the integrity and/or credibility of the dental hygiene profession.

A dental hygienist may only depart from a guideline if they can demonstrate their chosen conduct:

- Achieves compliance with the applicable standard;
- Maintains the safety, effectiveness, or appropriateness of care required by the standard; and
- Upholds the integrity of the dental hygiene profession.

While these guidelines reflect the requirements for dental hygienists at the time of development, these requirements may change from time to time. Dental hygienists remain responsible for ensuring their practice meets current legislative requirements, Standards of Practice, and Code of Ethics.



The Code of Ethics as a Guide for Your Professional Practice

The Code of Ethics identifies the responsibilities that you have in your practice of dental hygiene. The principles are intended to guide you in your professional decisions to ensure your practice is ethical and benefits your patient.

In all cases, dental hygienists are accountable for how they conduct themselves in professional practice. You are expected to review the Code of Ethics and apply the principles and responsibilities to professional situations to determine an ethically responsible decision.

Using Your Code of Ethics to Resolve Ethical Challenges

Ethical challenges that arise in practice may consist of ethical violations, ethical dilemmas or ethical distress.

	Definition	Example
Ethical Violation	A situation where you fail to meet or neglect your specific ethical responsibilities as expressed in the Code of Ethics.	A dental hygienist who recommends unnecessary treatment to achieve personal gain at the patient's expense.
Ethical Dilemma	A situation where you must choose one option as a course of action when there are ethical reasons for and against all the available options. A situation where there is conflict among two or more ethical principles	A dental hygienist deciding whether to provide invasive dental hygiene services to a patient who has refused to take their required premedication (conflict between the Principle of Patient's Autonomy and Informed Choice and the Principle of Beneficence and Non-Maleficence)
Ethical Distress	A situation where you experience constraints or limitations (to which you are or feel powerless) that compromise your ability to practice in full accordance with your Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice. A situation where you are significantly limited by factors beyond your immediate control that may not be easily resolved in the specific context.	A dental hygienist is expected by their employer to complete dental hygiene services with insufficient time to render quality care or to provide an acceptable level of infection control.



Resolving Ethical Challenges

Ensure you can justify your ethical decision-making by referring to the principles and responsibilities listed in the Code of Ethics. You should be able to articulate why it is you chose a particular action over another to resolve an ethical challenge.

Resolution	
Ethical Violation	The ethical resolution is compliant with your Code of Ethics or Standards of Practice.
Ethical Dilemma	<p>The ethical resolution depends on the specific circumstances of the case in question and may be subjective to the dental hygienist considering the situation.</p> <p>There may not be a completely satisfying resolution for all the parties involved.</p> <p>More than one of the options may be ethical and reflective of good practice.</p>
Ethical Distress	The ethical resolution is compliant with your Code of Ethics or Standards of Practice.

Constructive discussion can be helpful to resolve ethical issues.

- Some challenges are perceived to be primarily ethical in nature when they are actually related to poor communication or lack of information rather than conflicting ethical principles.
- Where appropriate, clients, colleagues, other health professionals, the ACDH, and other experts can be included in ethical issue discussions.
 - Ensure you respect patient privacy and confidentiality in discussions with others by keeping identifying information confidential and obtaining patient consent when appropriate.
 - Even when others are consulted, you are accountable for your final decision.

There may be discrepancies between how different people would resolve an ethical challenge. In some cases, two different approaches may both be reasonable. Ensure you can justify your decision as being compliant with legislation, regulations, Code of Ethics, and Standards of Practice.

One way to gain confidence about the resolution to your ethical challenge is to ensure you have gone through a methodical process to consider all of the relevant information. The decision-making framework below can help you to do this.



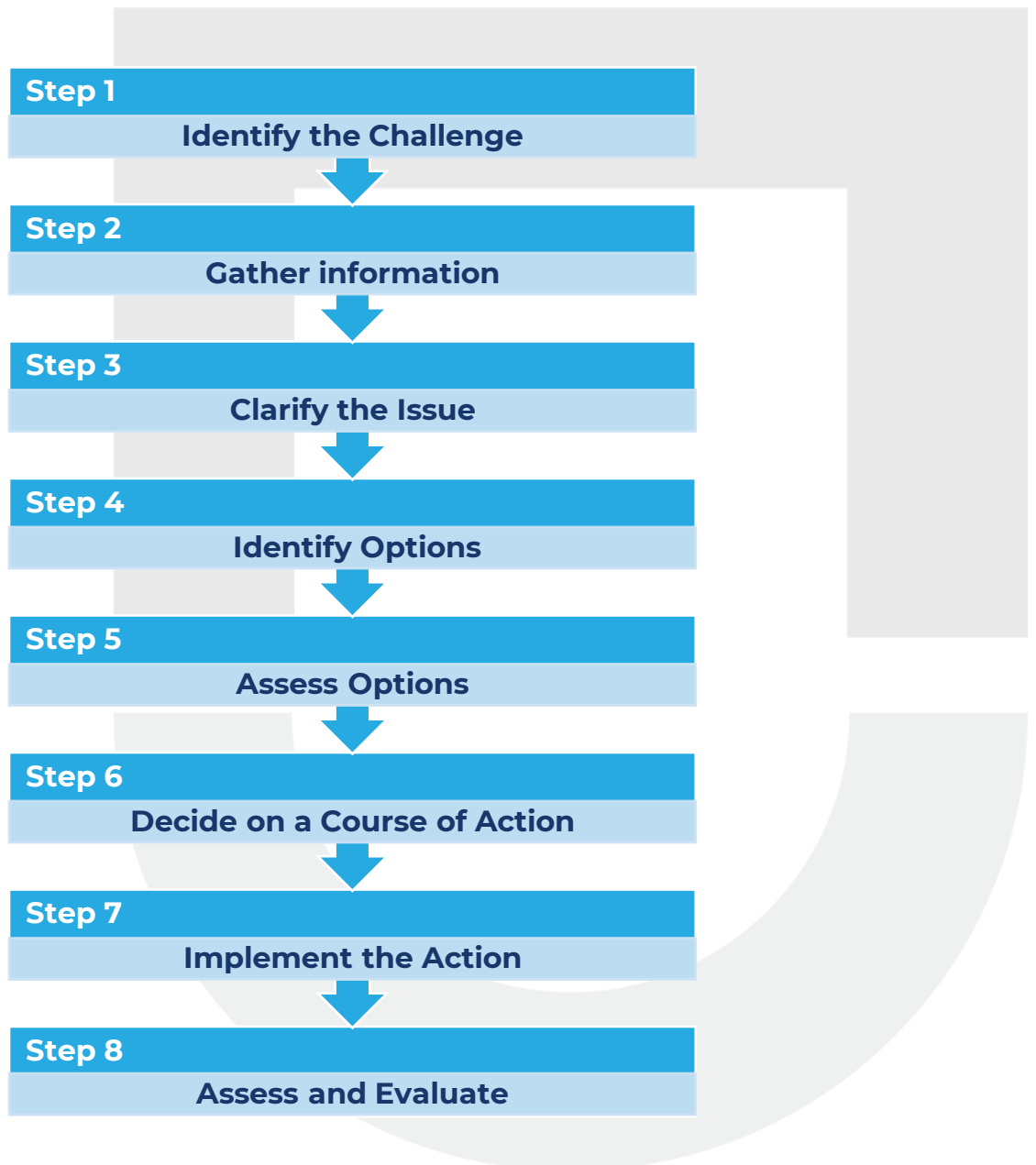
Framework for Ethical Decision-Making

This framework is intended to provide you with a decision-making process to use for ethical challenges that arise in a variety of contexts. The process requires thoughtful analysis and careful judgment.

When following this framework, consider other stakeholders who may need to be involved in resolving the matter.

- Ensure you respect patient privacy and confidentiality if you choose to talk to or get advice from others.

Each step of the framework for ethical decision-making is discussed below.





Step 1- Identify the Challenge

Identify the nature of the challenge in a preliminary way.

Questions to ask at this step include:

- What is the issue?
- What kind of challenge is it (e.g., ethical violation, ethical dilemma, ethical distress)?
- Which ethical principle(s) may be engaged (e.g., Beneficence and Non-Maleficence; Veracity and Integrity; Patient's Autonomy and Informed Choice; Confidentiality and Patient's Privacy; Accountability)?
 - Are there competing ethical principles?
 - Which ethical principle is most beneficial to your patient considering your patient's needs, values, interests, and goals?
 - Is there a way to uphold both seemingly conflicting principles?
- What is preventing you from meeting your ethical responsibilities?
 - Do you have the capacity to change the circumstances preventing you from complying?

Step 2- Gather Information

Seek relevant information that will suitably inform you about the challenge. There are several methods to collect relevant information, including speaking to others (ensuring the patient's privacy and confidentiality are respected), reviewing relevant legislation and regulations, and researching pertinent policy statements.

Questions to ask at this step include:

- Questions about the factual information about the situation:
 - What has happened and what is the sequence of the events?
 - What factual information is missing?
- Questions about applicable legislation, regulations, or policies:
 - What legislation and regulations apply?
 - Is there any information in legislation and/or regulations that is relevant to this situation?
 - What principles in the Code of Ethics apply to this?
 - What Standards of Practice apply to this?
 - Is there a workplace policy that addresses this situation?
- Questions about relevant stakeholders:
 - Who are the relevant people, groups, or organizations that may have an interest or concern in the situation?
 - What are the stakeholders' views on the situation?
 - What policies are in place that are relevant to this situation (e.g., employer policies)?



Step 3- Clarify the Issue

Clarify and elaborate on the issue creating the challenge after reviewing the relevant information you have gathered.

Questions to ask at this step include:

- Now that you are better informed, has your view of the challenge changed?
- How do the ethical principles and responsibilities specifically apply to this issue?
- Who needs to be consulted or involved in resolving the issue?

Step 4- Identify Options

Use creativity to identify various options for actions. The best option may not be obvious at first.

Step 5- Assess Options

Use the applicable legislation, regulations, policies, Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics principles to assess the options you identified. Consider the risks and benefits of each option.

Questions to ask at this step include:

- Why is one option favourable? Unfavourable?
- How do the different options compare to each other?
- Which option would you personally prefer if you were in the same situation as the patient and why?
- From the patient's perspective, what option should be chosen?
- What options do you think will do the "most good" or the "least harm"?
- What options lessen the ethical distress you feel?

Step 6- Decide on a Course of Action

Decide on a course of action by considering how you would justify, defend, or explain your decision to others.

Step 7- Implement the Action

Implement your decision, being mindful of other stakeholders who may be affected by your choice. Ensure you communicate a willingness to discuss the reasons you have for making the decision.

Step 8- Assess and Evaluate

Assess the outcomes of your decision. Evaluate the process you took to reach your decision considering those outcomes.

Questions to ask at this step include:

- Did things turn out as you thought they would?



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- Do you need to adjust your approach?
- Would you do the same thing again?
- What went wrong, or what went right?
- Is it necessary to revise existing workplace policies or add in new policies and guidelines for subsequent situations or decisions?

ACDH Compliance Advisors

If you have questions while working through this framework you can contact an ACDH Compliance Advisor through the [ACDH website](#), by phone (780-465-1756), or by email (complianceadvisor@acdh.ca). The Compliance Advisor will not be able to resolve the challenge for you, but they may be able to point you towards helpful resources or the applicable legislation, regulations, Standard of Practice, or Code of Ethics principles.