

# **Professionalism, Ethics & Legal Responsibilities Study Guide for Dental Nurses**

*NEBDN-aligned revision and refresher resource*

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## Introduction

Professionalism, ethics, and legal responsibilities underpin all aspects of dental practice. Dental nurses are regulated professionals who are expected to act in a manner that protects patients, maintains public trust, and upholds the standards of the profession.

This area of practice extends beyond clinical skills. It includes professional behaviour, ethical decision-making, understanding legal duties, and recognising accountability within the dental team. A sound understanding of these principles is essential for safe, lawful, and ethical dental care.

## Professionalism in Dental Nursing

Professionalism refers to the attitudes, behaviours, and values expected of a dental nurse in all professional settings.

Key aspects of professionalism include:

- Acting in the best interests of patients
- Maintaining appropriate professional boundaries
- Demonstrating honesty and integrity
- Being reliable, punctual, and accountable
- Respecting colleagues and patients

Professional behaviour applies both inside and outside the clinical environment. Actions that undermine confidence in the profession may have professional consequences.

Dental nurses are expected to comply with the standards set by the General Dental Council, which define expected professional conduct and responsibilities.

## Ethical Principles in Dental Practice

Ethics involves making decisions that are morally appropriate and in the best interests of patients.

Ethical principles guide professional judgement, particularly in situations where there may be uncertainty or competing interests.

The core ethical principles relevant to dental nursing include:

- **Autonomy** – respecting a patient’s right to make informed decisions
- **Beneficence** – acting in the patient’s best interests
- **Non-maleficence** – avoiding harm
- **Justice** – treating patients fairly and without discrimination

Dental nurses support ethical practice by respecting patient choices, providing accurate information when appropriate, and escalating concerns when ethical issues arise.

## **Consent**

Valid consent is a fundamental legal and ethical requirement in dental care. While dentists obtain consent for treatment, dental nurses must understand the principles that underpin it.

Key features of valid consent include:

- The patient has capacity
- The consent is given voluntarily
- The patient has been provided with sufficient information

Dental nurses may support the consent process by:

- Reinforcing explanations already given
- Checking patient understanding
- Recognising when consent may not be valid and alerting the dentist

Consent may be withdrawn at any time, and treatment must stop if this occurs.

## **Confidentiality**

Confidentiality is a core professional and legal responsibility. Patients must be confident that their personal and medical information will be protected.

Dental nurses must:

- Keep patient information secure
- Share information only on a need-to-know basis
- Avoid discussing patient details in public or non-clinical areas
- Follow data protection policies

Breaches of confidentiality may lead to legal action, professional investigation, and loss of patient trust.

## **Legal Responsibilities and Duty of Care**

Dental nurses owe a duty of care to patients. This means acting in a way that avoids foreseeable harm and supports safe treatment.

Legal responsibilities include:

- Working within scope of practice
- Following practice policies and procedures
- Maintaining infection prevention standards
- Reporting concerns appropriately

Failure to meet legal responsibilities may result in professional misconduct or legal claims.

## **Accountability and Scope of Practice**

Accountability refers to being answerable for one's actions and decisions. Dental nurses are accountable for the care they provide and for recognising the limits of their role.

Dental nurses must:

- Work only within their training and competence
- Follow lawful instructions
- Refuse tasks that fall outside their scope of practice
- Seek guidance when unsure

Acting outside scope may place patients at risk and expose the dental nurse to disciplinary action.

## **Raising Concerns and Whistleblowing**

Dental nurses have a professional responsibility to raise concerns about unsafe, unethical, or unlawful practice.

Concerns may relate to:

- Patient safety
- Professional misconduct
- Poor infection control
- Breaches of confidentiality

Concerns should be raised through appropriate channels, such as a line manager or practice manager. Whistleblowing protections exist to support staff who raise genuine concerns in good faith.

## **Complaints and Professional Conduct**

Complaints may arise from patient dissatisfaction or concerns about care. Dental nurses should understand how complaints are managed within the practice.

Dental nurses should:

- Remain professional and calm
- Avoid becoming defensive
- Follow the practice complaints procedure
- Refer complaints to appropriate staff

Handling complaints professionally supports learning, improvement, and patient confidence.

## **Equality, Diversity, and Respect**

Dental professionals must treat all patients fairly and with respect, regardless of background or personal characteristics.

Dental nurses should:

- Avoid discriminatory behaviour
- Communicate respectfully with all patients
- Be aware of individual needs and vulnerabilities
- Support inclusive practice

Failure to uphold equality and respect may breach ethical and legal standards.

## **Continuing Professional Development (CPD)**

Dental nurses are required to maintain and develop their professional knowledge and skills throughout their career.

CPD supports:

- Safe and effective practice
- Professional competence
- Compliance with regulatory requirements

Dental nurses must ensure their CPD is relevant, accurate, and recorded appropriately.

## **The Role of the Dental Nurse in Professional and Ethical Practice**

The dental nurse plays an active role in maintaining professional and ethical standards by:

- Acting with integrity
- Protecting patient confidentiality
- Supporting informed consent
- Working within scope
- Raising concerns when necessary
- Engaging in ongoing professional development

Professionalism is demonstrated consistently through behaviour, judgement, and accountability.

### **Summary**

Professionalism, ethics, and legal responsibilities form the foundation of safe and effective dental practice. Dental nurses are trusted professionals who must act with integrity, respect patient rights, and comply with legal and regulatory requirements.

A strong understanding of ethical principles, legal duties, and professional accountability enables dental nurses to support high standards of care, protect patients, and maintain public confidence in the dental profession.