



# ESSENTIALS OF MEDICAL PROFESSIONALISM

# About *Essentials of Medical Professionalism*

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The *Health Professions Procedural Code* under the *Regulated Health Professions Act, 1991* requires that the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario (CPSO) “develop, establish and maintain standards of professional ethics for the members.”

*Essentials of Medical Professionalism* sets out CPSO’s expectations related to professional ethics and articulates the values and duties at the core of medical practice. It is intended to provide broad guidance to CPSO registrants (the profession) and to inform patients, the public, and others about what they can expect from the medical profession.

This resource is meant to guide professional judgment and behaviour by providing an overarching view of the standards the profession holds for itself and the expectations the public has of physicians, both individually and collectively.

## Essentials of Medical Professionalism

# At a Glance

*Essentials of Medical Professionalism* sets out CPSO's expectations related to professional ethics and articulates the values and duties at the core of medical practice.

In medicine, professionalism consists of the words and actions of physicians that foster **trust** and **respect** with patients, colleagues, and the public.

Competent physicians foster trust and respect and deliver quality care by:

Practising with  
**INTEGRITY**

Committing to  
**RESPONSIBILITY**

Practising with  
**HUMILITY**

Recognizing and honouring  
**HUMANITY**

By enacting the values and duties of medical professionalism in their daily encounters with patients and colleagues, physicians positively contribute to the health of the system, the profession, and the public.

# Essentials of Medical Professionalism and You

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Providing quality care requires more than clinical competence; it involves upholding the standards of medical professionalism and, by extension, the social contract. The social contract is an agreement between the profession as a whole and the public it serves: in return for professional autonomy, the profession commits to upholding the values and duties of medical professionalism and to promoting the public good within its domain. *Essentials of Medical Professionalism* sets out the principles of medical professionalism and can help physicians uphold them in their day-to-day practice.

The values and duties described in this resource inform the specific expectations set out in CPSO policies and, along with these policies, help physicians deliver quality care for the people of Ontario. Together with CPSO policies, relevant legislation, and case law, *Essentials of Medical Professionalism* will be used by CPSO as a benchmark when considering or evaluating physician practice and conduct.

Conflict among the values and duties outlined in this resource may occur, and in such situations, physicians will need to use their best judgment on how to proceed.

## What is Medical Professionalism?

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In medicine, professionalism consists of **the words and actions of physicians that foster trust and respect with patients,<sup>1</sup> colleagues,<sup>2</sup> and the public.**

**Trust** and **respect** are the core values of the medical profession. Competent physicians foster trust and respect and deliver quality care by:

- Practising with **integrity**
- Committing to **responsibility**
- Practising with **humility**
- Recognising and honouring **humanity**

<sup>1</sup> The term “patient” is used to refer to patients and their loved ones, including but not limited to caregivers, family members, friends, and substitute decision-makers.

<sup>2</sup> The term “colleague” is used to refer to physicians; other health care professionals; hospital or clinic administrative, ancillary, and support staff; medical students, interns, residents; and anyone involved in the provision of health care.

# PRACTISING WITH INTEGRITY

For physicians, having integrity means practising within the guidelines and standards of the profession. It means making sound clinical and behavioural judgments and acting in good faith for the benefit of patients even in challenging situations.

## Physicians demonstrate integrity in their work with patients by:

- Using their medical expertise to provide the best possible quality of care;
- Considering each patient’s well-being and acting in their best interest;
- Maintaining professional boundaries with patients;
- Avoiding conflicts of interest and safeguarding their professional independence;
- Protecting the privacy of patients’ personal health information.

## Physicians demonstrate integrity in their work with colleagues by:

- Working respectfully and collaboratively with other members of the health-care team, even when their personal beliefs and/or professional opinions differ;
- Raising concerns about a colleague’s inappropriate, unprofessional, or otherwise concerning behaviour directly with that colleague (or, if needed, escalating the concerns to the relevant leadership or authority) in a manner that does not compromise their own safety.

## Physicians demonstrate integrity in their work with the public by:

- Preserving the reputation of the profession;
  - Engaging in respectful public debate;
  - Putting forward evidence-informed viewpoints;
  - Using social media responsibly and in a way that upholds the standards of professionalism;
- Maintaining the standard of care.

### What physicians are saying

***“Amid the challenges I face in my day-to-day practice, the values of the medical profession – integrity, responsibility, humility, and humanity – help me make difficult decisions over easy, comfortable ones. I am conscious of how my behaviours are observed by colleagues and learners, and I see how these values form the basis of trust and respect in all my professional interactions.”***

# COMMITTING TO RESPONSIBILITY

For physicians, committing to responsibility means understanding what is expected of them and striving to meet those expectations. It also means recognising the different groups to whom physicians are responsible.

Though their primary responsibilities are always to their patients and their patients' best interests, physicians are also collectively responsible to each other, to others involved in health-care delivery, and to the public they serve.

## Physicians demonstrate responsibility in their work with patients by:

- Providing safe, competent care;
  - Keeping skills and knowledge up to date;
  - Recommending treatments and interventions informed by evidence and scientific reasoning;
- Advocating for individual patients;
  - Helping patients navigate the health-care system;
- Communicating honestly and effectively with patients;
  - Striving to ensure that patients understand the nature and significance of their condition and the treatment options available to them.

## Physicians demonstrate responsibility in their work with colleagues by:

- Promoting open channels for feedback;
- Recognising and fulfilling their obligations in the context of team-based care;
- Modelling respect, appropriate conduct, and healthy collegial relationships in the workplace.

## Physicians demonstrate responsibility in their work with the public by:

- Considering the value of social accountability in the practice of medicine;
  - Recognising the social determinants of health impacting patients and communities;
  - Responding to community and population health needs;
  - Acknowledging the importance of equitable access to health care and social supports;
- Practising in a manner that promotes and protects public health;
- Recognising the power and role of respectful, evidence-based advocacy in improving patient and public health;
- Fulfilling reporting obligations;
- Practising effective resource stewardship.

### What physicians are saying

***“I aspire to practise with medical expertise grounded in integrity, humility, and humanity while showing responsibility to my patients, my colleagues, my community, and my country. It’s a tall order but, to the degree that I’ve met those aspirations, I’ve been fortunate to have a career that has been fulfilling beyond all expectations.”***

# PRACTISING WITH HUMILITY

**For physicians, being humble involves acknowledging the inherent vulnerability of patients and recognising the power imbalance between physicians and patients.**

By practising with and showing humility, physicians accept that achieving the best outcomes for patients is an ongoing process nurtured through collaboration and engagement with others.

## **Physicians can practise with and show humility in their work with patients by:**

- Undertaking lifelong learning in clinical knowledge, leadership, and communication (e.g., active listening, de-escalation, and conflict resolution);
- Recognising when there is a gap in their knowledge (clinical or otherwise) and working to remedy that gap;
- Showing cultural humility<sup>3</sup> while working with all patients;
  - Learning about and respecting patients' lived experiences, values, and beliefs;
  - Asking patients about their preferences regarding the care they receive;
- Enabling and empowering patients to be partners in their care;
  - Engaging in shared decision-making and patient-centred care;
  - Welcoming and respecting the views of patients;
  - Encouraging patients to be proactive in maintaining their own health and well-being;

- Seeking to understand what an illness means for patients and their families.

## **Physicians practise with and show humility in their work with colleagues by:**

- Being open and receptive to the views and feedback of colleagues;
- Seeking help and support from colleagues, when needed;
- Supporting and mentoring colleagues;
- Managing conflict with colleagues in a productive, dignified, and safe manner;
  - Reflecting on one's role in the conflict.

## **Physicians practise with and show humility in their work with the public by:**

- Participating in collaborative, team-based, and patient-centred models of care.

### ***What physicians are saying***

***“As physicians, we must always be experts with respect to the medical management of patients, but we must also remember that our patients are people, just like us, who deserve to be treated by doctors who practise, not only with rigorous science, but also with the ‘soft skills’ which are every bit as difficult to master and to employ.”***

<sup>3</sup> A lifelong process of self-reflection to understand personal and systemic biases and develop relationships based on mutual trust. Cultural humility involves humbly acknowledging oneself as a learner when it comes to understanding another's experience.

# RECOGNISING AND HONOURING HUMANITY

**By honouring their own humanity and the humanity of others, physicians create the foundations for trusting, respectful, and empathetic relationships.**

For physicians, honouring humanity means recognising the inherent value and dignity of all people, including themselves, and keeping the varied experiences of patients at the centre of health care delivery. It also means acknowledging that physicians and other care providers themselves need care and compassion in order to provide effective and sustainable care. In the practice of medicine, recognising and honouring humanity means caring for people, not simply treating diseases.

## **Physicians honour their own humanity by:**

- Acknowledging their physical and social needs, vulnerabilities, and limitations;
- Demonstrating self-compassion in the face of personal pain and moral injury;
- Recognising personal impairment or decline;
- Asking for help from colleagues and making use of available wellness resources, when necessary.

## **Physicians honour the humanity of their patients by:**

- Respecting the autonomy of their patients;
- Reflecting on their biases;<sup>4</sup>
- Fostering welcoming and inclusive spaces for everyone;

- Using patients' preferred names, titles, and pronouns;
- Recognising the unique opportunities and barriers faced by each patient;
- Committing to allyship<sup>5</sup> and acknowledging the discrimination faced by patients from marginalized populations.

## **Physicians honour the humanity of their colleagues by:**

- Recognising the individual needs and lived experiences of colleagues and other care providers;
- Modelling kindness, ethical care, and compassion for colleagues, staff, learners, and other care providers;
- Fostering an emotionally and physically safe workplace that is conducive to the delivery of quality health care.

### ***What physicians are saying***

***“Essentials of Medical Professionalism articulates the ways in which I, as a physician, can provide competent, conscientious, and compassionate care to achieve the best possible outcomes for my patients. The emphasis on recognizing our common humanity is particularly impactful in the current context of the pressures facing physicians and other health-care providers.”***

<sup>4</sup> An inclination to think something or someone is better or preferred, usually in a way considered to be unfair. Bias can be explicit or conscious or implicit or unconscious. Bias inhibits impartial judgment, thought, or analysis. Biases (particularly implicit or unconscious) are built into and perpetuated by societal systems and structures through socialization and may conflict with our declared beliefs and how we see ourselves.

<sup>5</sup> An active, consistent, and arduous practice of unlearning and re-evaluating, in which an individual in a position of privilege and/or power seeks to operate in solidarity with a marginalized group. An ally supports people outside of their own group.

# Professional Duties and Regulation

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Collectively, physicians have been granted the privilege of profession-led regulation. Preserving this privilege requires the profession to maintain an effective and appropriate governance structure and a reliable system of accountability. This means it is not enough for individual physicians to accept regulation; each physician has a professional duty to actively participate in the regulatory process.

## **Physicians participate in profession-led regulation by:**

- Engaging with CPSO, as necessary;
- Cooperating with CPSO during investigations, as required by legislation;
  - Disclosing information relevant to investigations;
- Being open to remediation;
- Maintaining familiarity with and adhering to CPSO policies;
- Participating in quality improvement opportunities when they are offered.

# Looking Forward

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*Essentials of Medical Professionalism* has been developed for Ontario physicians and the Ontario public and articulates the values and duties the medical profession holds for itself. Even amid the competing demands facing individual physicians and the significant challenges impacting the health-care system broadly, these values and duties are exhibited every day in physicians' offices, clinics, hospitals, and anywhere health care is delivered across the province.

While physicians continue to strive to fulfill these professional duties in their day-to-day practice, they are not expected to take on responsibility for the health system alone. By enacting these values and duties in their daily encounters with patients and colleagues, however, physicians can and will continue to positively contribute to the health of the system, the profession, and the public.