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## Medical ethics and professional etiquettes: The foundational principles of clinical practice

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### Abstract

This article dives into why medical ethics and professional etiquette are so crucial in clinical practice, highlighting how they form the backbone of quality healthcare and patient-focused decision-making. Medical ethics offers a moral compass for tackling tricky clinical situations, guided by principles like autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice. On the other hand, professional etiquette takes these principles and puts them into action, shaping how physicians interact, communicate, and show respect to both patients and colleagues. By referencing global standards like the Declaration of Helsinki, ICH-GCP guidelines, and various national ethical codes, the article underscores how the combination of ethical principles and etiquette is vital for ensuring patient safety, dignity, and trust in medical care. It also addresses modern challenges such as end-of-life care, genetic testing, artificial intelligence, and conflicts of interest in research that require a strong commitment to ethical and professional standards. By blending ethics with etiquette, clinical practice not only protects patient rights but also enhances professionalism and upholds the dignity of the medical field.

**Keywords:** Medical ethics, professional etiquette, clinical practice, patient safety

### Introduction

Medical ethics and etiquette are the bedrock of clinical practice, safeguarding the integrity of the medical profession while prioritizing patient welfare. Ethics offers a moral compass for healthcare professionals, guiding them through tough decisions and helping them discern right from wrong in complex situations. Meanwhile, etiquette shapes the professional conduct and interactions between healthcare providers and patients, creating a respectful and compassionate atmosphere. Together, these principles are vital for maintaining public trust and confidence in the medical field. In a time marked by rapid scientific progress, the rise of new technologies, and the intricacies of modern healthcare systems, it's crucial for physicians to strike a balance between their clinical judgment and ethical duties, ensuring that patient care always takes centre stage in their practice<sup>[1, 2]</sup>.

### I. Ethical Foundations

The ethical foundation of medical practice is built on four key principles: autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice<sup>[3]</sup>. These principles guide healthcare interactions, ensuring that medical decisions respect individual rights and societal norms. Autonomy highlights the importance of informed patient choices, while beneficence and non-maleficence focus on healthcare professionals' duty to promote well-being and avoid harm. Justice emphasizes fairness in healthcare resource distribution and equitable treatment for all patients.

### The Four Principles of Medical Ethics

Rooted in the Hippocratic tradition, modern medical ethics has been systematized through the four principles approach described by Beauchamp and Childress: autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice.

These principles are integral to professional guidelines governing medical practice globally. For example, the Declaration of Helsinki<sup>[4]</sup>, established by the World Medical Association, outlines ethical standards for medical research, stressing informed consent and participant welfare.

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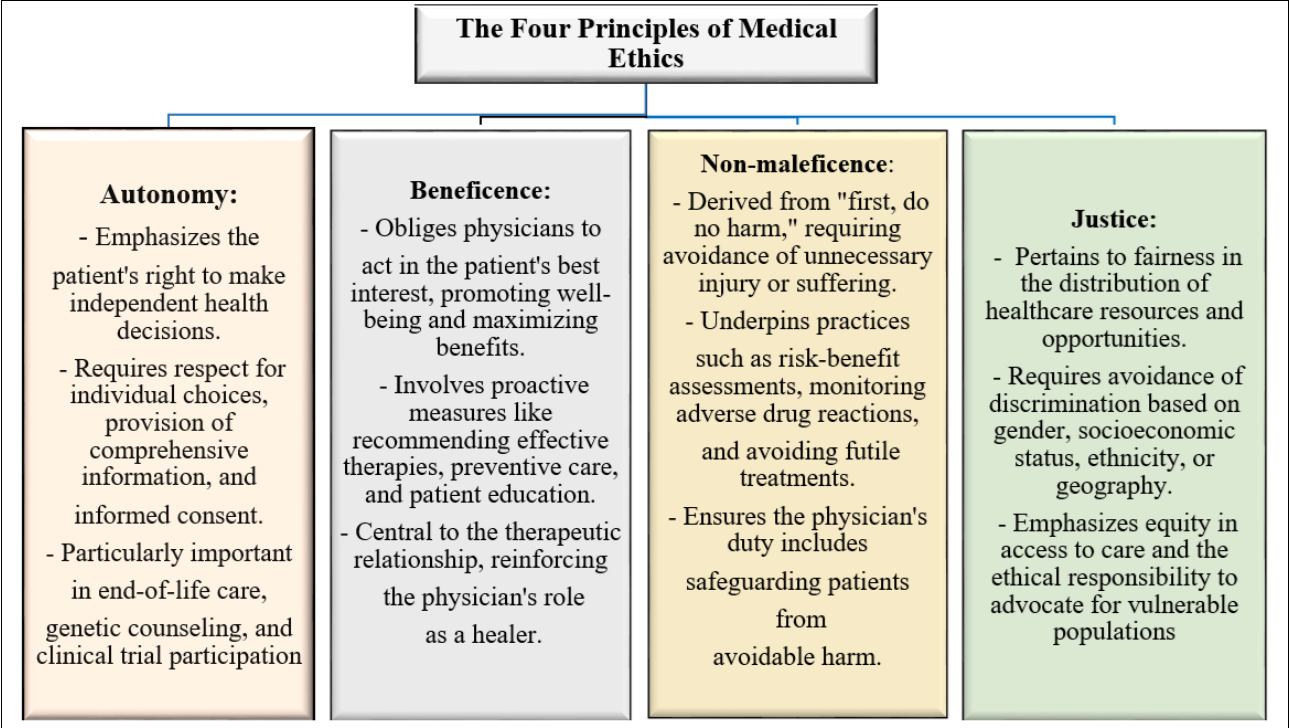


Fig 1: The Four Principles of Medical Ethics











Medical Etiquettes				
 MEDICAL ETHICS				
Medical etiquettes embody ethical principles in daily interactions	It emphasizes courtesy, empathy, and professionalism	Clear communication is vital with patients and their families.	Respectful dialogue fosters trust and understanding	Collaboration with colleagues enhances patient care
 Interdisciplinary Team	 Health Privacy			 Medical Ethics
Teamwork with allied health staff is essential for effective treatment.	Confidentiality must be maintained while ensuring transparency.	Professional appearance and language reflect respect for patients.	Behavior should always uphold the dignity of all individuals	Continuous adherence to these principles strengthens healthcare relationships.

Fig 2: Medical Etiquettes

The International Council for Harmonization's Good Clinical Practice (ICH-GCP) <sup>[5]</sup> sets standards for clinical trials, prioritizing the rights and safety of participants. In India, the Ethical Guidelines from the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) adapt these principles to the country's cultural context <sup>[6]</sup>. Additionally, the Medical Council of India (MCI) Regulations of 2002, updated in 2016, define the responsibilities of physicians in India, underscoring the importance of ethical conduct in medical practice <sup>[7]</sup>.

**2. Etiquettes in Practice,** Medical etiquettes translates ethical principles into everyday interactions. It reflects courtesy, empathy, and professionalism in relationships with patients, colleagues, and society. Essential aspects include: For example, good etiquettes ensure that informed consent discussions are not merely legally compliant and patient-friendly, fostering understanding and trust <sup>[8]</sup>. Similarly, respectful interprofessional communication reduces errors and enhances patient safety <sup>[9]</sup>.

### 3. Ethical Codes

Medical ethical codes play a crucial role in guiding healthcare professionals by emphasizing key principles such as patient autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice. These standards enable healthcare workers to navigate complex situations with integrity, ensuring that patient well-being remains a priority.

These guidelines are particularly beneficial for physicians, nurses, and researchers when faced with challenging scenarios, including end-of-life care and resource allocation. In such dilemmas, ethical codes act as a moral compass, underscoring the importance of compassion and respect for individual needs, especially in the context of rapid medical advancements.

**Table 1:** Timeline of Medical Ethical Codes

Year	Ethical Code/Declaration	Key Principles
~ 460-370 BC	Hippocratic Oath	Do no harm, confidentiality, beneficence, duty to teach.
World Medical Association, 1948 → revised 2017	Declaration of Geneva	Respect autonomy & dignity, patient first, non-discrimination, confidentiality, lifelong professionalism.
World Medical Association, 1964; latest 2024	Declaration of Helsinki	Ethics in research: informed consent, ethics review, risk-benefit balance, vulnerable groups, scientific integrity.
1979, U.S.	Belmont Report	Respect for persons (autonomy), beneficence, justice.
ICMR National Ethical Guidelines (India, 2017) NDCT 2019 updated the recent updated in 2025	Modern Guidelines (ICMR, AMA, GMC, etc.)	Applies to biomedical and health research. Covers: Informed consent. Vulnerable populations. Data privacy & confidentiality. Community engagement. Ethics committee oversight
Medical Council of India → 1934 Regulations: 2002, amended 2016. General Medical Council, UK → 1858 Ethics Code: 1995, updated 2024. American Medical Association, US → 1847 Code: 1847, continuously updated.	Medical Council Codes (e.g., MCI in India, GMC in UK, AMA in US)	Focus on professional conduct: Honesty and integrity. Avoiding conflicts of interest. Maintaining patient trust. Collegiality and interprofessional respect.

**4. Unethical Acts and Professional Misconduct in Medicine:** Unethical acts in medicine undermine trust, professionalism, and the safety of patients. Organizations like medical councils (MCI/NMC, GMC, AMA) and research regulators (ICMR, NDCT 2019, Helsinki Declaration) have clear definitions and penalties for misconduct to maintain the integrity of the profession.

#### 1. Violation of Patient Rights

- Not getting informed consent from patients.
- Breaching confidentiality or sharing medical records without permission.
- Discriminating against individuals based on gender, caste, religion, socioeconomic status, or disability.

#### 2. Professional Misconduct

- Making false claims about qualifications or practicing beyond what's legally allowed.
- Issuing fake medical certificates, prescriptions, or reports.
- Engaging in fee-splitting, kickbacks, or unethical referrals.
- Promoting oneself or advertising beyond professional boundaries.

#### 3. Clinical Negligence

- Showing gross negligence or recklessness in treatment.
- Prescribing unnecessary tests or harmful medications.
- Performing procedures without the right indication or proper training.

#### 4. Research Misconduct

- Fabricating, falsifying, or plagiarizing in research.
- Running clinical trials without approval from an Ethics Committee.
- Taking advantage of vulnerable populations in research.

#### 5. Financial and Commercial Exploitation

- Accepting gifts, incentives, or benefits from pharmaceutical companies that sway prescribing decisions.
- Overcharging patients or unnecessarily extending treatment.

#### 6. Unethical Personal Conduct

- Substance abuse that impacts clinical responsibilities.
- Sexual harassment or exploitation of patients or colleagues.
- Displaying disrespectful or abusive behaviour towards patients, families, or colleagues.

#### 5. Potential consequences or Penalties for Unethical Acts and Professional Misconduct in Medicine

Unethical acts and professional misconduct undermine the integrity of medical practice and erode patient trust. Medical councils such as the NMC (formerly MCI), GMC, and AMA, along with regulatory frameworks like the NDCT Rules (2019), define and penalize such behaviours.

**Table 2:** Unethical acts/ Misconduct their possible Consequences or Penalties

Unethical Act / Misconduct	Consequences / Penalties
Failure to obtain informed consent	Disciplinary action; cancellation of licence; legal liability under NDCT 2019.
Breach of confidentiality	Warning, suspension, or licence revocation by Medical Council; civil liability for damages.
False claims of qualifications / practice beyond scope	Licence cancellation; criminal charges for fraud.
Issuing false certificates or prescriptions	Suspension or permanent removal from medical register; legal prosecution.
Fee-splitting, kickbacks, or unethical referrals	Professional censure; monetary fines; suspension by council.
Clinical negligence (gross recklessness in treatment)	Compensation to patient; civil or criminal liability; suspension of practice.
Unapproved or unethical research trials	Ban on research activities; cancellation of ethics committee approval; penalties under NDCT 2019.
Fabrication or plagiarism in research	Retraction of publications; academic disqualification; loss of research funding.
Accepting undue benefits from pharma companies	Conflict-of-interest penalties; professional suspension.
Sexual harassment or exploitation of patients	Immediate suspension; criminal prosecution; permanent loss of licence.
Substance abuse affecting professional duties	Rehabilitation requirement; suspension or revocation of licence.

## 6. Emerging Challenges in Clinical Practice

Modern medicine is facing a host of new ethical challenges. Issues like end-of-life care, genetic testing, the use of artificial intelligence in diagnostics, and conflicts of interest in research and publication all require thoughtful consideration <sup>[10]</sup>. Clinical research organizations and healthcare institutions need to adhere to global standards, such as those set by COPE (Committee on Publication Ethics) <sup>[11]</sup> and ICMJE (International Committee of Medical Journal Editors), along with national regulations to ensure transparency and accountability <sup>[12]</sup>. Another significant challenge is upholding professionalism amid rising commercialization and heightened patient expectations. Doctors must find a way to balance the demands of their organizations with their ethical responsibilities, emphasizing their role as healers rather than just service providers <sup>[13]</sup>.

## Conclusion

Ethics and etiquette are essential in clinical practice, guiding healthcare professionals in prioritizing patient welfare, respecting autonomy, and ensuring justice. Ethics provides a moral framework for effective care, while etiquette fosters dignity and professionalism in interactions. Together, they protect patient rights, build trust, and enhance the integrity of the medical profession.

Adhering to ethical guidelines and professional standards helps providers navigate complexities in clinical practice, addressing issues like informed consent, confidentiality, and equitable access to care. This adherence promotes accountability and transparency, encouraging patients to seek care and follow treatment plans. Integrating etiquette improves communication, reduces misunderstandings, and fosters collaboration in decision-making.

Ultimately, the synergy of ethics and etiquette elevates care standards, ensuring patients receive compassionate and respectful treatment <sup>[14]</sup>.

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