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Ethical Principles in Dentistry: Assessing Ethical Consciousness among Dentists in Kabul

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Abstract

Background:

Medical ethics in dentistry plays a vital role in ensuring patient-centered, fair, and professional care. Key ethical principles—such as autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, and confidentiality—are essential in dental practice. In Kabul, Afghanistan, where the healthcare system faces serious challenges due to political instability, poverty, and limited resources, the attitudes and awareness of dentists regarding professional ethics remain underexplored.

Methods:

A cross-sectional survey was conducted among 100 dental professionals in Kabul using a structured questionnaire distributed through online platforms. The data were collected via Google Form, and analyzed using SPSS 26.

Results:

Participants were predominantly male (86%), under 35 (92%), and graduates of private universities (76%). While most valued patient-centered care (79%) and practiced informed consent (72%), only 58.6% prioritized patient well-being over financial gain. Ethical training was viewed as insufficient (58%) despite regular participation in development activities (65%).

Conclusion:

The findings indicate moderate to strong ethical awareness among dentists in Kabul, especially regarding confidentiality and informed consent. However, economic pressures and insufficient formal ethics education may affect consistent ethical practice. Enhancing ethics training in dental curricula and implementing clearer regulations could strengthen professional conduct and improve patient care in Afghanistan's complex healthcare environment.

Key words:

Dental Ethics, Professional Ethics, Ethical Awareness, Dentists in Kabul, Healthcare Ethics.

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Introduction

Medical ethics is a branch of ethics that focuses on the moral principles and guidelines governing the practice of medicine. It addresses issues such as patient autonomy, informed consent, confidentiality, and the duty of healthcare professionals to provide care that is in the best interest of patients. (1) Medical ethics also involves navigating complex dilemmas like end-of-life decisions, allocation of scarce resources, and the balance between patient rights and public health. (2) The field is guided by key principles, including beneficence (doing well), non-maleficence (avoiding harm), justice (fairness), and respect for patient autonomy. (3) These principles help ensure that healthcare providers act with integrity, compassion, and respect for human dignity in their professional conduct. (4)

In dentistry, medical ethics plays a crucial role in ensuring that dental professionals provide care that is not only technically competent but also morally sound. (5) Dentists are guided by ethical principles such as patient autonomy, which involves respecting a patient's right to make informed decisions about their treatment options.(6) Informed consent is a key aspect, ensuring patients are fully aware of the risks, benefits, and alternatives before undergoing procedures.(7) Additionally, the principle of non-maleficence emphasizes that dentists must avoid causing harm, whether through unnecessary treatments or improper techniques.(8) Confidentiality is another critical ethical consideration, as dentists are entrusted with sensitive patient information. Dental professionals also must navigate the ethical responsibility to provide care equitably, ensuring that all patients, regardless of background or socioeconomic status, receive appropriate treatment. By adhering to these ethical standards, dentists uphold trust, professionalism, and the well-being of their patients. (9)

The practice of dentistry, like all healthcare professions, is guided by a set of ethical principles that ensure the well-being, dignity, and rights of patients are prioritized. (10) In Kabul, Afghanistan, as in many parts of the world, the attitudes of dentists towards these ethical principles can significantly influence the quality of care provided, the trust between patients and healthcare providers, and the overall functioning of the healthcare system. However, there is limited research on how these ethical principles are understood, valued, and applied by dental professionals in Afghanistan, particularly in Kabul, where the healthcare landscape is shaped by unique cultural, social, and political factors (11).

In summary, according to the principle of respect for patient autonomy, the dentist must respect the patient's decision-making and confidentiality. (12) The patient has the right to decide on the treatment they will receive. (13) Based on the principle of no maleficence, dentists should keep their knowledge and skills up-to-date and be aware of their limitations, referring the patient to a specialist if necessary to prevent harm. According to the principle of beneficence, the dentist should provide timely and appropriate treatment based on the patient's needs.(14) Based on the principle of justice, the dentist should be fair when dealing with patients, colleagues, and society, treating patients fairly regardless of their ethnicity, beliefs, race, gender, or nationality.(15)

Jang and colleagues, in a study on the awareness and attitudes of 330 dental students and professors, reported that they were aware of the importance of professional ethics, but their level of knowledge and attitudes towards medical ethics was moderate (16)

Elsheikh and colleagues reported that 75% of 307 final-year Sudanese dental students had a satisfactory perception of dental ethics and professionalism education. (17) They also stated that the need for professional training courses in dental schools was increasing. In a study by Janakiram and colleagues, aimed at comparing the awareness and attitudes of newly graduated physicians and dentists in India, physicians had greater knowledge and attitudes towards the principles of professional ethics (PPE) than dentists, and they suggested that bioethics courses should be presented at the beginning of the postgraduate program. (18)

Afghanistan, as a low-income and war-torn country, has faced significant challenges in developing a stable and efficient healthcare system. Decades of conflict, political instability, and economic hardships have

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severely disrupted public services, including healthcare. The ongoing violence, internal displacement, and lack of infrastructure have left many regions, especially rural areas, without access to basic medical care. According to the World Bank (19) Afghanistan's healthcare system is underfunded and has limited access to medical professionals and essential healthcare services. The country's low income, combined with insufficient health expenditure, has resulted in poor healthcare outcomes, including high maternal and child mortality rates (20). Additionally, with most of the population living in poverty, access to quality care is severely limited, contributing to widespread health disparities. The ongoing conflict further complicates efforts to improve healthcare, as it displaces healthcare workers and destroys health facilities, particularly in areas that are more vulnerable. The lack of stable governance and international support for the healthcare sector has hindered meaningful reforms and improvements in health services, leading to widespread public health issues (21).

This study seeks to evaluate dentists' attitudes towards the principles of professional ethics in Kabul, focusing on their understanding of core ethical guidelines such as patient confidentiality, informed consent, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice. By assessing the perceptions and practices of dental professionals in this context, the research aims to identify areas where improvements might be needed, whether in education, policy, or practice, and to offer recommendations that could contribute to the enhancement of dental care and professional ethics in Afghanistan. This research will determine the level of professional ethics among dentists in Kabul, providing valuable insights into how ethical standards are practiced and perceived in a challenging healthcare environment.

Materials and Methods

This cross-sectional study was conducted among 100 dental doctors practicing in Kabul. A structured questionnaire was developed using Google Forms to assess ethical attitudes and practices. Prior to distribution, the questionnaire underwent review and approval by the administration and faculty of Bayazid Rokhan Institute of Higher Education. Following formal approval and informed consent from participants, the questionnaire link was disseminated through WhatsApp and Telegram to dental professionals at their respective clinics.

After data collection, responses were compiled in Microsoft Excel for preliminary organization and subsequently imported into SPSS version 26 for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data, providing insights into the ethical perceptions and professional behaviors of the participating dental doctors.

Results

The sample consisted of 100 dental professionals, with a majority of participants falling into the younger age categories: 45% were under 25 years old, and 47% were aged 25–34 years. The remaining participants were distributed across older age groups, with 7% aged 35–44 years, 1% aged 45–54 years, and none over 54 years. Regarding education, 76% attended private universities, while 24% attended public institutions (Table 1). The sample was predominantly male (86%), with 14% female participants. In terms of professional experience, 63% of the participants had 0–5 years of experience, 32% had 6–10 years, and 5% had 11–15 years, with no participants reporting more than 16 years of experience. Most of the dentists (80%) worked in private practice, followed by 10% in government positions and 10% teaching at universities. (Table 1)

Table 2: Demographic and Professional Profile of Surveyed Dentists

Variables	n	n%

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Age	Under 25 years	45	45.0%
	25–34 years	47	47.0%
	35–44 years	7	7.0%
	45–54 years	1	1.0%
	Above 54 years	0	0.0%
University Attended	Public	24	24.0%
	Private	76	76.0%
Gender	Male	86	86.0%
	Female	14	14.0%
Years of Experience in Dentistry	0–5 years	63	63.0%
	6–10 years	32	32.0%
	11–15 years	5	5.0%
	More than 16 years	0	0.0%
Type of Practice in Dentistry	Private	80	80.0%
	Government	10	10.0%
	Teaching at University	10	10.0%

As shown in Table: Dentists' Perspectives on Ethical Decision-Making and Patient-Centered Care, the majority of participants (79.0%) considered it "very important" that care is provided based on patients' needs and preferences. Most respondents (58.6%) agreed that dentists should always prioritize patient well-being over financial gain, though 33.4% disagreed or strongly disagreed. A large proportion (72.0%) reported that they always inform patients about treatment risks and benefits, indicating strong adherence to informed consent practices. Regarding the ethics of recommending non-medically necessary treatments for financial benefit, 60.0% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the practice, suggesting widespread concern over its ethical acceptability (Table2)

Table2: Dentists' Perspectives on Ethical Decision-Making and Patient-Centered Care

Variables		n	n %
How important is it that care is provided based on patients' needs and preferences?	Very important	79	79.0%
	Important	12	12.0%
	Somewhat important	9	9.0%
	Not important	0	0.0%

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Do you believe a dentist should always prioritize patient well-being over financial gain?	Strongly agree	37	37.4%
	Agree	21	21.2%
	Neutral	8	8.1%
	Disagree	26	26.3%
	Strongly disagree	7	7.1%
How often do you inform patients about the risks and benefits of treatments?	Always	72	72.0%
	Often	7	7.0%
	Sometimes	13	13.0%
	Rarely	4	4.0%
	Never	4	4.0%
Do you believe it is ethical for a dentist to recommend treatments that are not medically necessary but may be financially beneficial to the practice?	Strongly agree	12	12.0%
	Agree	17	17.0%
	Neutral	11	11.0%
	Disagree	33	33.0%
	Strongly disagree	27	27.0%

As shown in Table: Dentists' Perspectives on Patient Confidentiality, the vast majority of participants (80.0%) rated patient confidentiality as "very important" in their practice. An additional 10.0% considered it "important," while only a small minority viewed it as "somewhat important" (9.0%) or "not important" (1.0%). (Table 3)

Table 3 Perceived Importance of Patient Confidentiality among Practitioners

Variables		n	n %
How important is patient confidentiality in your practice?	Very important	80	80.0%
	Important	10	10.0%
	Somewhat important	9	9.0%
	Not important	1	1.0%
How often do you ensure that patient information is securely stored and only accessible to authorized individuals?	Always	71	71.0%
	Often	11	11.0%
	Sometimes	12	12.0%
	Rarely	2	2.0%
	Never	4	4.0%

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Have you ever encountered a situation where you had to disclose confidential patient information? If yes, how did you handle it?	Yes	13	13.3%
	No	85	86.7%

When asked how they respond to dentists who promote their services using potentially misleading or exaggerated advertisements, a majority of participants (55%) strongly agreed that they take a critical stance. An additional 8% agreed, while 19% remained neutral. In contrast, 17% disagreed and only 1% strongly disagreed, indicating overall concern among respondents about unethical advertising practices in dentistry. (Table 4)

Table 4 Practitioners' Responses to Misleading or Exaggerated Dental Advertisements

variable		n	n %
How do you respond to dentists who promote their services using potentially misleading or exaggerated advertisements?	Strongly agree	55	55.0%
	Agree	8	8.0%
	Neutral	19	19.0%
	Disagree	17	17.0%
	Strongly disagree	1	1.0%

In response to how conflicts or disagreements with colleagues are typically resolved, the majority of participants (63%) reported using open discussion and collaboration. Formal conflict resolution methods were employed by 22%, while 15% preferred to avoid conflict. Notably, no respondents selected "Other" as a resolution approach. (Table 5)

Table 5 Employee Responses to Conflict Resolution Strategies in the Workplace

variable		n	n %
How do you usually resolve conflicts or disagreements with colleagues at work?	Open discussion and collaboration	63	63.0%
	Formal conflict resolution methods	22	22.0%
	Avoiding conflict	15	15.0%
	Other	0	0.0%

The majority of respondents (63%) reported that they usually resolve workplace conflicts or disagreements through open discussion and collaboration. Formal conflict resolution methods were used by 22% of participants, while 15% tended to avoid conflict. No participants selected alternative methods under "Other. (Table 6)

Table 6 Perception of the Need for Stricter Regulations in Kabul's Dental Profession:

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variable		n	n %
Do you believe stricter regulations are needed to control the behavior and performance of dentists in Kabul?	Yes	51	51.0%
	No	49	49.0%
	Not sure	0	0.0%

When asked about participation in professional development related to dental ethics, 65% of respondents reported engaging regularly. An additional 26% participated sometimes, while 7% did so rarely. Only 2% indicated they never participated in such activities, highlighting a generally strong commitment to ongoing ethical education among respondents. (Table7)

Table 7: Participation in Professional Development on Dental Ethics

variable		n	n %
How often do you participate in professional development related to dental ethics?	Regularly	65	65.0%
	Sometimes	26	26.0%
	Rarely	7	7.0%
	Never	2	2.0%

Regarding the overall ethical standards in the dental profession in Kabul, 32.3% of respondents rated them as good, 29.3% as average, and 19.2% as excellent. However, 15.2% rated them as poor, and 4.0% as very poor, indicating a range of perspectives on ethical standards in the field.

In terms of ethical education and training, 58% of participants felt that ethical issues were adequately addressed during their dental education, 23% felt they were not, and 19% believed they were addressed only to some extent.

Notably, all respondents (100%) indicated that they had never faced a situation where ethical guidelines conflicted with their personal beliefs, with 0% reporting such an experience. (Table 8)

Table 8 Active Participation in Promoting Oral Health Awareness:

variable		n	n %
How do you evaluate the overall ethical standards in the dental profession in Kabul?	Excellent	19	19.2%
	Good	32	32.3%
	Average	29	29.3%
	Poor	15	15.2%
	Very poor	4	4.0%
Do you feel ethical issues were adequately addressed in your dental education and	Yes	58	58.0%
	No	23	23.0%
	To some extent	19	19.0%

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training?			
Have you ever faced a situation where ethical guidelines conflicted with your personal beliefs? How did you resolve it?	Yes No	0 92	0.0% 100.0%

Finding:
This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. The study was conducted independently by the authors as part of their commitment to advancing ethical standards in healthcare in Afghanistan.

Discussion

This study provides valuable insights into the ethical awareness, attitudes, and practices of dental professionals in Kabul, Afghanistan. Despite the country's ongoing political instability, economic hardship, and under-resourced healthcare infrastructure, the findings suggest that many dentists demonstrate a commendable understanding of key ethical principles such as patient autonomy, informed consent, beneficence, non-maleficence, and confidentiality.

The high percentage of respondents (72%) who reported always informing patients of treatment risks and benefits indicates a strong culture of informed consent among dental practitioners in Kabul. This is consistent with global ethical standards in dentistry, which emphasize the patient's right to make autonomous decisions about their treatment options [22]. Moreover, 79% of participants viewed patient-centered care as "very important", affirming a widespread recognition of the importance of aligning care with individual patient needs and preferences.

However, the study also highlights several areas of ethical concern. Notably, while 58.6% of dentists agreed that patient well-being should be prioritized over financial gain, a significant minority (33.4%) expressed opposing views. This suggests a tension between ethical ideals and financial motivations, which may reflect broader systemic issues such as economic pressures and lack of regulation [23]. Additionally, 60% of dentists disagreed with the practice of recommending non-medically necessary treatments for financial gain, leaving 40% either neutral or supportive of this ethically questionable behavior. These results echo findings from previous studies conducted in similar low-resource settings, where financial instability and weak oversight have been shown to influence ethical decision-making in healthcare [24,25].

Regarding patient confidentiality, 80% of respondents rated it as "very important", and 71% reported always ensuring the secure storage of patient information. This is encouraging, especially in a context where digital record-keeping systems are limited and risks of data breaches are higher. Nevertheless, the fact that 13% had encountered situations requiring the disclosure of confidential information underscores the importance of training dentists on how to navigate such scenarios in compliance with ethical and legal guidelines [26].

One of the most notable findings concerns the perception of ethical standards in the profession. While 32.3% of respondents rated Kabul's dental ethics as "good", only 19.2% rated them as "excellent", and a

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combined 19.2% rated them as "poor" or "very poor". These mixed responses suggest that while there is some confidence in the ethical integrity of the profession, there is still room for improvement. This perception aligns with international literature highlighting the gap between ethical knowledge and its application in clinical practice [27].

The responses regarding professional development and ethics education further support this need for improvement. While 65% of dentists reported participating regularly in ethical development activities, only 58% believed that ethical issues were adequately addressed during their formal dental education. This mirrors findings from studies in other low- and middle-income countries, where ethics training is often insufficient or inconsistently delivered during undergraduate programs [28,29]. Moreover, the absence of reported personal ethical dilemmas may reflect a lack of exposure to bioethical discourse or limited awareness of how personal values can intersect with professional duties.

Interestingly, 51% of respondents agreed on the need for stricter regulation of dental practices in Kabul, indicating growing awareness of systemic gaps in enforcement and accountability. This is particularly relevant in light of concerns regarding misleading advertisements and unethical promotional practices. With 63% of dentists preferring open discussion and collaboration to resolve workplace conflicts, there appears to be a culture of collegiality, which could be leveraged to promote peer accountability and ethical mentoring [30].

Taken together, these findings point to the critical need for reforms in dental ethics education, stronger regulatory oversight, and the establishment of clear professional guidelines to support ethical practice in dentistry in Afghanistan. Tailored training programs, inclusion of ethics modules in dental curricula, and continuing education opportunities are essential steps toward aligning practice with ethical ideals. Professional bodies and governmental health agencies must collaborate to ensure that ethical standards are not only taught but enforced through licensing, audits, and ongoing practitioner evaluation

Conclusions

This study highlights both strengths and gaps in the ethical awareness and practices of dentists in Kabul. While many practitioners exhibit a strong commitment to core ethical principles such as patient autonomy, informed consent, and confidentiality, significant concerns remain—particularly regarding financial motivations, advertising ethics, and the adequacy of ethics education. The findings point to a clear need for systemic interventions, including the integration of comprehensive ethics training into dental curricula, ongoing professional development, and the establishment of stricter regulatory frameworks. Addressing these issues is essential for fostering a more ethically grounded dental profession in Afghanistan—one that can better serve patients, build public trust, and contribute to the broader development of the healthcare system in a challenging socio-political environment.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several targeted measures are recommended to strengthen ethical awareness and professional conduct among dentists in Kabul and across Afghanistan:

1. Integration of Ethics into Dental Curricula
   Dental education institutions should incorporate a structured and comprehensive ethics curriculum that includes core ethical principles, case-based discussion, and practical applications to enhance ethical reasoning and decision-making skills among dental students.
2. Mandatory Continuing Professional Development in Ethics
   Regulatory authorities and professional bodies should require ongoing ethics-focused continuing professional development (CPD) as part of licensure renewal. Regular workshops, seminars, and clinical scenario training can reinforce ethical standards throughout a practitioner’s career.

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3. Strengthening Regulatory Frameworks and Oversight Mechanisms
National and professional regulatory entities must establish and enforce clear ethical guidelines, particularly regarding financial transparency, professional advertising, and confidentiality. Systematic monitoring and accountability procedures are essential to ensure compliance and address violations effectively.
4. Establishment of Transparent Patient Complaint Systems
A formal, accessible, and confidential mechanism for patients to report unethical practices should be developed. Transparent review processes and fair disciplinary actions are critical for improving trust and encouraging high-quality ethical practice.
5. Promotion of Ethical Culture and Public Awareness
Professional associations, academic institutions, and healthcare organizations should actively promote a culture of ethical practice through awareness initiatives, recognition programs, and public education on patient rights. Enhancing public knowledge and empowering patients may help reinforce ethical behavior within dental practice.

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Conflict of Interest
The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to this study or its publication.

Ethics Approval
Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the administration and research committee of Bayazid Rokhan Institute of Higher Education before the commencement of data collection. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Participation was voluntary, confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study, and no personally identifiable information was collected.

Informed Consent
Electronic informed consent was obtained from all participants before they completed the online questionnaire. Participants were informed about the objectives of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, their right to withdraw at any time without any consequences, and the confidentiality of their responses.

Data Availability
The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participating dentists.

Author Contributions
Samiullah Seerat: Conceptualization, study design, literature review, questionnaire development, data collection, statistical analysis, interpretation of findings, manuscript drafting, critical revision, and final

approval of the manuscript. The author read and approved the final version of the manuscript and accepts responsibility for all aspects of the work.

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