Professional success varies for each individual, but ultimately we want to serve our patients to the best of our ability. Despite our best intentions, litigation remains a reality.

There are various definitions for professionalism. I like the Learner’s Dictionary’s version most:

“the skill, good judgment, and polite behaviour that is expected from a person who is trained to do a job well. “

However, that is not all. Professionalism includes more aspects such as our values, beliefs and integrity.

Values and Beliefs are unique to each one of us.

Many of us were taught when we were young to have certain standards of behaviour, and that our value system reflects the kind of person we are.

They were set by our family, friends, teachers and our environment.

They reflected what our family or role models thought was important in life. [2]

What is Integrity?[3]

Integrity is a characteristic that many of us value in ourselves, and it's one we look for consistently in our leaders. But what does it really mean to have integrity?
The Random House Dictionary defines integrity as:

1. Adherence to moral and ethical principles; soundness of moral character; honesty.
2. The state of being whole, entire, or undiminished.
3. A sound, unimpaired, or perfect condition.

Although the definition is sound, it can be a bit more complex to define integrity in our everyday lives.

You could say that integrity is always doing the right thing, even when no one is looking, and even when the choice isn't easy. Or, you might see integrity as staying true to yourself and your word, even when you're faced with serious consequences for the choices that you're making.

Alternatively, look at the second and third of these definitions. These were likely meant for structures, such as the integrity of a building. But we can just as easily apply this definition to ourselves. When we have integrity, we're whole and in perfect condition, and we're not compromised by awkward "inconsistencies."

When we live our lives with integrity, it means that we're always honest, and we let our actions speak for who we are and what we believe in. Integrity is a choice we make, and it's a choice we must keep making, every moment of our lives.

MindTools.com is an online training facility that teaches management, leadership and personal skills. For the sake of this article, please read their article Professionalism- Developing this Vital Characteristic (double click on the link).

Anyone can make a mistake. Being a professional does not mean we have to be flawless, but handling a problematic situation in a professional manner goes a long
way to solving the problem. Think back to January 2009 when a passenger plane had to make an emergency landing in the Hudson River, New York. Something unforeseen happened, things did not go according to plan and an emergency situation developed. What did the world talk about? All the newspapers and TV channels praised Captain Sullenberger and his crew’s handling of the situation. That is where professionalism shows. But it goes further. Detailed and proper record keeping is part of our professional core. The dental assistant or oral hygienist’s records can play a vital role in the outcome of a legal matter. If you are making notes of a conversation, and is in doubt about anything, confirm with the operator before saving it.

The HPCSA gives guidelines on proper record keeping:


If you know the rules, you will find many useful tools on the internet. Look for example at www.findmyimplant.com While this website respects privacy of the patient’s information, it offers a service that the dentist, the hygienist and the patient will benefit from.

In the first issue we looked at the ethical guidelines the HPCSA set out as guidelines for good practice, but ethics goes beyond good practice.

Ethics refers to well-founded standards of right and wrong that prescribe what we ought to do, usually in terms of rights, responsibility, benefits to society, fairness, or specific virtues. Is it safe to say it is ethical to act in line with what society or an
employer or medical aids expect from us? Definitely not. What if society is xenophobic or a medical aid is more concerned about financial wellbeing than physical wellbeing?

Ethics refers to the study and development of one’s ethical standards. As mentioned above, feelings, laws, and social norms can deviate from what is ethical. So it is necessary to constantly examine one’s standards to ensure that they are reasonable and well-founded. [4]

The article What is ethics gives clear guidelines that will help us to make ethical decisions on a personal and professional level. Please read the full article.

If a patient is unhappy with our service or behaviour, he/she can either report the matter to the HPCSA or may take legal action against the professional. When listening carefully, one can usually hear the warning bells in a patient’s version of a story.

Communication is essentially sending and receiving messages. There is a bit of irony in the fact that a good communicator is a good listener- but never the less true. All our best professional and ethical efforts will be worthless if the message the patient receives differ from the one we thought we send or vice versa.

Let’s do a three minute quiz to test our communication skills [6]. Get a pen and paper and do this test:
1. Read everything before you do anything.

2. Write your name in the upper top left-hand corner of this page.

3. Circle your name.

4. Draw five small squares in the upper right-hand corner.

5. Put an X in each square you have just drawn.

6. Put a circle around each square.

7. Sign your name at the bottom of this page.

8. After your name, write, “yes, yes, yes.”

9. Underline your name.

10. Put an X in the lower left-hand corner of the page.

11. Draw a triangle around the X you have just made.

12. Stand up and (loudly) call out your first name. (Optional)

13. On the back of this page multiply 5 times 4.

14. Draw a circle around the answer.

15. On the reverse side of this paper add the numbers 25 and 100.

16. Count out in your normal speaking voice from one to 10.

17. Using your pencil, punch three small holes at the bottom of this paper.

18. If you think you have carefully followed these directions, stand up, turn around and whisper, “I have carefully followed the directions.”

No you don’t really have to get up and whisper. Rather look at what is on your piece of paper and go back to point 1.

Are you one of the few that followed instructions? Well done! You are an attentive communicator.

Effective communication skills are essential for all dental professionals. As dental assistants and oral hygienists interact with many people each day, it is important to understand how the multifaceted communication process works in order to assure that the messages we send are received as intended.

The communication process includes multiple components, and each component is critical to effective and thorough communication. The cycle includes the sender's
idea, sender’s filter (constructing the message to suit the receiver best), the message, receiver’s filter, the receiver’s understanding of the message, and feedback. During effective communication, thoughts and ideas should be offered in an appropriate manner so that others will listen and understand.

It is important to be aware that feelings affect how a message is delivered. Your confidence, comfort with offering suggestions, evaluation of the timeliness of the communication, and “status” relative to the person with whom you are communicating should all be considered. A comfortable or positive self-concept will generate more effective communication. A strong self-concept prevents defensive behaviour, which hinders communication. A self-concept is largely a reflection of the reactions of others towards you the individual.

The sender’s perception of the importance of the message, comfort delivering the message, determination of how to give the message, and concern for how the message will be received all affect the outcome of the communication. Effective communication is increased if the sender feels positive or respectful toward the receiver. Negative or non-respectful feelings require a conscious effort to overcome for successful communication. (Love thy patient! 😊)
Active listening

Really listening to others and showing them that you’re listening and hearing what they say is critical. Effective listening is actually a difficult skill that requires significant effort. Listening is as important to communication as sending the message. Listening is an active process during which the listener interacts with the speaker.

Effective listening requires attention to nonverbal cues, such as gestures, facial expressions, and body language. Internally criticizing the speaker’s delivery, becoming emotional about a concept, listening for only general facts and ignoring details, pretending to be attentive, overreacting to certain words or phrases, and lack of attention all hinder the communication process. The feelings and attitudes of the listener affect what is perceived. Therefore, it is most helpful to be open to the sender, refrain from interruption, and try to hear what’s being said rather than what has not been said.

Suspend making a judgment about the message, avoid distraction, and always pause and think before responding. Once a comment is made it cannot be taken back. Show interest nonverbally, do not include your own issues, and be sure to review critical information. Reflect on the message the speaker is trying to send and respond when appropriate. Interpersonal communication depends on making thoughts, feelings, and needs known to others, and the receptiveness of others in sharing similar information. The process is involved and includes concerted efforts by multiple individuals.

Although communication may be considered in simplistic terms, such as sending and receiving messages, both elements must be present for effective communication to occur. The basic transaction of the message does not validate that actual communication has occurred. The process is often only partially completed due to circumstances surrounding the communication attempt. Some factors that may affect the communication process include, but are not limited to, the environment in which the communication occurs, emotions, verbal ability, lack of attention to the message, hidden agendas, status of participants, and defensiveness. These factors may result in mixed messages and may distort the content. A significant factor is the trust of the parties involved, as communication may be negatively affected if the parties are cautious and lack trust. Be aware of any conditions that may block or alter the intention of the sent and received messages.
Feedback
It is not always easy to hear what others are saying. To prevent misunderstanding, hurt feelings, and errors, effective feedback mechanisms are necessary. In order to facilitate the communication process, paraphrase to clarify issues, use open-ended questions, and refrain from defensive responses, which block the feedback. It is always helpful to thank the person giving the feedback and seek clarification when necessary. Feedback not intended to help the recipient is often received negatively. When one is angry or hurt, feedback will not be well received.

To guard against punitive feedback, keep feedback specific and behavioural. Note that constructive criticism relating to specific behaviour provides opportunities for productive change. Well-intentioned behavioural feedback is productive as it is given to help the receiver become aware of and change behaviour. Be selective in choosing when and where to offer feedback so that it will be best received.

When providing feedback, share positives, be specific, and focus on behaviour. The primary motive for providing feedback should be to be helpful. Feedback should be immediate and shared privately. If these protocols are followed and the receiver becomes defensive, clarify the feedback to be sure there is no misunderstanding. If defensiveness continues, reschedule another time for discussion or, depending on the circumstances, adhere to the issues and carefully explore the root of the difficulty. Be aware that the receiver's position relative to you and your role may also affect how you proceed. Always remember to be respectful of others during all communication.[7]

If an accident happens, be honest. Admit that it happened, discuss it with the patient and try to rectify it as best possible. Be sincere- apologise. An apology is not an admission of guilt. Show that you care. Refer the patient to the appropriate person if necessary, offer assistance if he/she needs it. Phone the next day to follow up. Place yourself in the patient’s shoes when dealing with the matter. As a professional, you are liable for your actions. Make sure you have indemnity insurance. Dental assistants are often covered through the dentist’s policy, but oral hygienists should have their cover. Look at Dental Protection Limited:

https://www.dentalprotection.org/south-africa/home

When developing and strengthening these skills, you empower yourself in a personal and professional capacity. We make decisions on a daily base. Some decisions will have a bigger impact on our lives than others, but ultimately we will be known for the principles we live by.
Look at the life of Leni Riefenstahl. She was an accomplished dancer and when injuries forced her to stop; she became an actress and later a filmmaker. In 1938 the film Olympia was released. It was written and directed by Leni and documented the 1936 Olympic games in Germany. For the first time cameras were mounted on trolleys and moved with the athletes - something we take for granted. It provided unusual camera angles and extreme close-ups not seen before. Leni made history. Hitler used this film as a Nazi propaganda film. Leni and Hitler were rumoured to be friends and although she was never associated with war crimes, this friendship had a negative impact on her career after the war. Professionally Leni was exceptional at the time, but if she asked and answered all the ethical questions before making the propaganda movies, she might have got the recognition she deserved for her massive contribution to sport-filming as we know it today.

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Question time:

1. Professionalism refers to sound business principals
   a. True
   b. False
2. To be a professional, you have to obtain an acknowledged tertiary qualification in your field.
   a. True
   b. False
3. Professionals don’t make excuses, but focus on:
   a. The betterment of the profession
   b. Protecting the image of the business
   c. Finding solutions
4. Keeping your CPD up to date is an essential part of being professional
   a. True
   b. False
5. Self-regulation refers to how you relates to patients when under pressure.
   a. True
   b. False
6. Ethical reflection helps us make:
   a. responsible judgements that reflect what we care about most.
   b. good decisions that guarantees success.
   c. beneficial judgements that reflect what we care about most.
7. According to the ethical article, when faced with a moral dilemma, should you:
   a. Refer it to a person more competent?
   b. Choose the lesser of two evils?
   c. Deal with the matter according to merits?
8. According to the ethical article, is it always ethical to ask: will this be to the benefit of the majority of people?
   a. Yes
   b. No

9. A message is not complete without feedback from the receiver.
   a. True
   b. False

10. Your emotional state plays no role in successful professional communication
    a. True
    b. False

11. Effective listening includes cues such as attention to the speaker’s attire.
    a. True
    b. False

12. How a patient feels in your surgery does not affect his/her ability to understand your message.
    a. True
    b. False

13. For effective communication, it is sometimes necessary to ask the same question twice - just using different words.
    a. True
    b. False

14. When giving oral hygiene instructions, avoid any form of criticism.
    a. True
    b. False

15. Making ethical decisions affect every aspect of your life.
    a. True
    b. False

Sources: