



FOCUS ON
HEALTH

Professional Ethics

Self-study CPD activity

Activity reference number
PE6(26)

Topic

Basic ethical principles

Article(s)

Back to basics - Ethical principles in healthcare

This activity is approved for **THREE (3) Ethics** Continuing Education Units (CEU's)

PART 1: Back to basics:

General ethical principles & guidelines in healthcare

Introduction

Ethics refers to the standards that guide our decisions and actions, based on core values, helping us determine what is right, fair, and just. A professional is deemed ethical when their behaviour is consistent with the accepted standards of their field.⁷ While medical knowledge and technology evolve, the core ethical principles that guide practice remain constant.

In South Africa, the Health Professions Council (HPCSA) provides ethical guidelines for healthcare practitioners. As registered professionals, we have moral obligations such as providing care, obtaining informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, and ensuring truthfulness.² These principles apply to all HPCSA-registered practitioners and serve as the benchmark for professional conduct.

This article will review the core ethical values and responsibilities of healthcare practitioners, serving as a reminder of the importance of professional integrity.

Outline

Introduction

CORE ETHICAL VALUES

- Beneficence
- Non-maleficence
- Justice, fairness and equity
- Autonomy
- Veracity and Integrity

PATIENT-CENTRED CARE

- Respecting patients
- Educating patients for effective self-care
- Compassion
- Practical approaches to patient centred care

INFORMED CONSENT

- Key components to be included in an informed consent document
- Advantages of digital informed consent

PATIENT CONFIDENTIALITY, AND THE PROTECTION OF HEALTH AND FINANCIAL INFORMATION

- Disclosure of Information
- POPIA Basics for Healthcare Practitioners

POTENTIAL CONFLICTS OF INTEREST, REFERRALS, AND COMMISSION

CORE ETHICAL VALUES

Beneficence

Beneficence is the ethical duty to maximise benefits and minimise harm, guiding us as healthcare practitioners to actively promote and support our patients' health, comfort, and well-being. It's about taking positive, purposeful actions that prioritise the best interests of our patients, ensuring we provide compassionate and competent care in every situation.¹



Non-maleficence

Non-maleficence is a key ethical principle in healthcare that focuses on the obligation to “do no harm.” It emphasises our responsibility to protect patients from harm in all aspects of care, avoiding actions that could cause injury, whether by doing something harmful (commission) or by failing to act when necessary (omission). In practice, this means thinking carefully about the risks and benefits of treatments, interventions, and procedures to ensure harm is minimised—or ideally, completely avoided.²

This principle is closely linked to the concept of patient safety and the importance of avoiding both physical harm and psychological distress. It extends to everyone, not just patients, and applies regardless of professional qualifications.¹

“Healthcare practitioners must not harm or act against the best interests of patients, even when the interests of the latter conflict with their own self-interest” (HPCSA)²

Justice, fairness and equity

The principle of *justice* focuses on fairness and equity in healthcare. It emphasises treating all individuals and groups impartially, fairly, and justly.² As healthcare practitioners, we have a responsibility to ensure equitable access to care, ensuring that all patients are treated with equal respect and receive quality services under similar circumstances.¹

Justice highlights *fairness* in how healthcare resources and services are provided. Everyone's interests should carry equal weight, regardless of factors such as race, ethnicity, creed, gender, socioeconomic status, or background. In practice, this means providing care based on patients' needs, rather than personal biases, to ensure fair treatment and positive outcomes for all.²

Equity requires that resources are allocated impartially, without considering a patient's social circumstances or financial ability. However, we must recognise that resource allocation should prioritise those in greatest need.²

"Healthcare practitioners should be aware of the rights and laws concerning unfair discrimination in the management of patients or their families on the basis of race, culture, ethnicity, social status, lifestyle, perceived economic worth, age, gender, disability, communicable disease status, sexual orientation, religious or spiritual beliefs, or any condition vulnerability."(HPCSA)²

Autonomy

Autonomy is about an individual's right to make informed decisions about their healthcare. This requires a clear understanding of treatment options, risks, benefits, and alternatives. It also includes the principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and the protection of personal data.

In practice, respecting autonomy means supporting patients in being fully involved in decisions about their treatment, even if they cannot legally provide consent. This involves ensuring patients are fully informed, free from coercion, and able to make decisions that align with their personal values and preferences. Patients also have the right to refuse treatment, opt out of teaching or research participation, and seek a second opinion without fear of it impacting their future care.^{1 2}

Self-determination, which is closely related, extends beyond healthcare. It encompasses the right to make decisions and live according to one's values, beliefs, and preferences in all areas of life.

Veracity and Integrity

Veracity is the obligation to be truthful and provide accurate information to patients. This means communicating transparently and ensuring no important details are withheld. By sharing full and honest information about diagnoses, treatment options, risks, and benefits, healthcare

practitioners empower patients to make informed decisions. Truthfulness is the foundation of trust in the relationship between practitioners and patients.²

Upholding veracity helps build trust, creating a relationship where patients feel confident their care is grounded in honesty and integrity. Trust is vital for effective communication and helps patients feel secure when making decisions about their care.

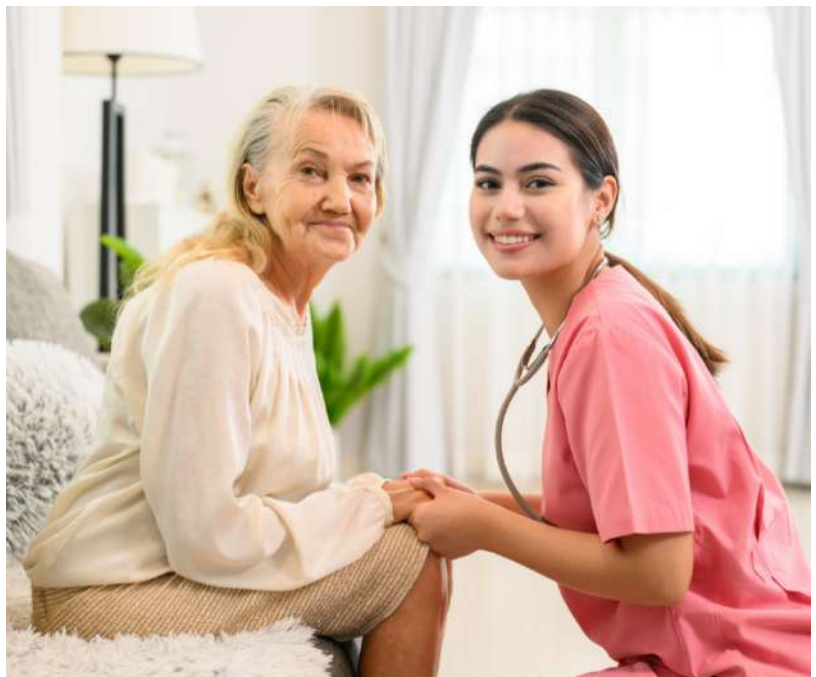
Integrity involves adhering to ethical principles and professional standards, even when no one is watching. It means behaving honestly and consistently, ensuring actions reflect personal values and the trust patients place in their caregivers. Integrity also includes admitting mistakes, maintaining confidentiality, and demonstrating high moral standards in all professional interactions.

Together, veracity and integrity are essential for building trust between healthcare practitioners and patients, creating an environment of honesty, transparency, and ethical conduct.^{1 2}

PATIENT-CENTRED CARE

Patient-centred care focuses on placing the patient's best interests at the heart of healthcare decisions ("duty to care"). Our primary obligation as healthcare practitioners is to provide high-quality care that supports the patient's well-being. This includes sharing clear and honest information based on evidence-based science and medicine.⁷

Being in a position of trust and authority comes with significant responsibilities. It's essential that we remain mindful of these responsibilities and avoid any



misuse of power. We should ensure accessibility during our working hours and make appropriate arrangements for care when we are off-duty. Respect for patients involves recognising their intrinsic worth, dignity, and value as individuals.^{1 2}

A patient's actions, even if they contributed to their condition, should never be a reason to refuse or delay treatment. It is both unethical and unprofessional to deny care based solely on a patient's perceived or actual disease status. The care we provide should never be compromised due to concerns about potential risks to ourselves. Additionally, making unilateral decisions not to resuscitate patients who may require it infringes upon their fundamental right to life.⁴

Respecting patients

The HPCSA lays out important principles that guide our practice as healthcare practitioners:

We need to always respect the privacy, confidentiality, and dignity of our patients. This means treating patients with care, politeness, and consideration, and listening to their concerns and opinions. It's about recognising their worth as individuals and ensuring they feel respected throughout their interactions with us.

Respecting human rights is another fundamental aspect of ethical practice. This involves acknowledging and supporting patients' diverse ethical beliefs, which may be shaped by personal, religious, or cultural values. We have a duty to protect these rights and to avoid any behaviour that could infringe upon them.

We must also avoid engaging in relationships that could be seen as inappropriate or unprofessional, whether with patients or anyone accompanying them. These boundaries help maintain trust and professionalism in our interactions.

When it comes to intimate examinations, it's important to communicate clearly with patients. They should always be informed about their right to have a chaperone present. Similarly, we must let patients know if we will have a chaperone present ourselves.²

Educating patients for effective self-care

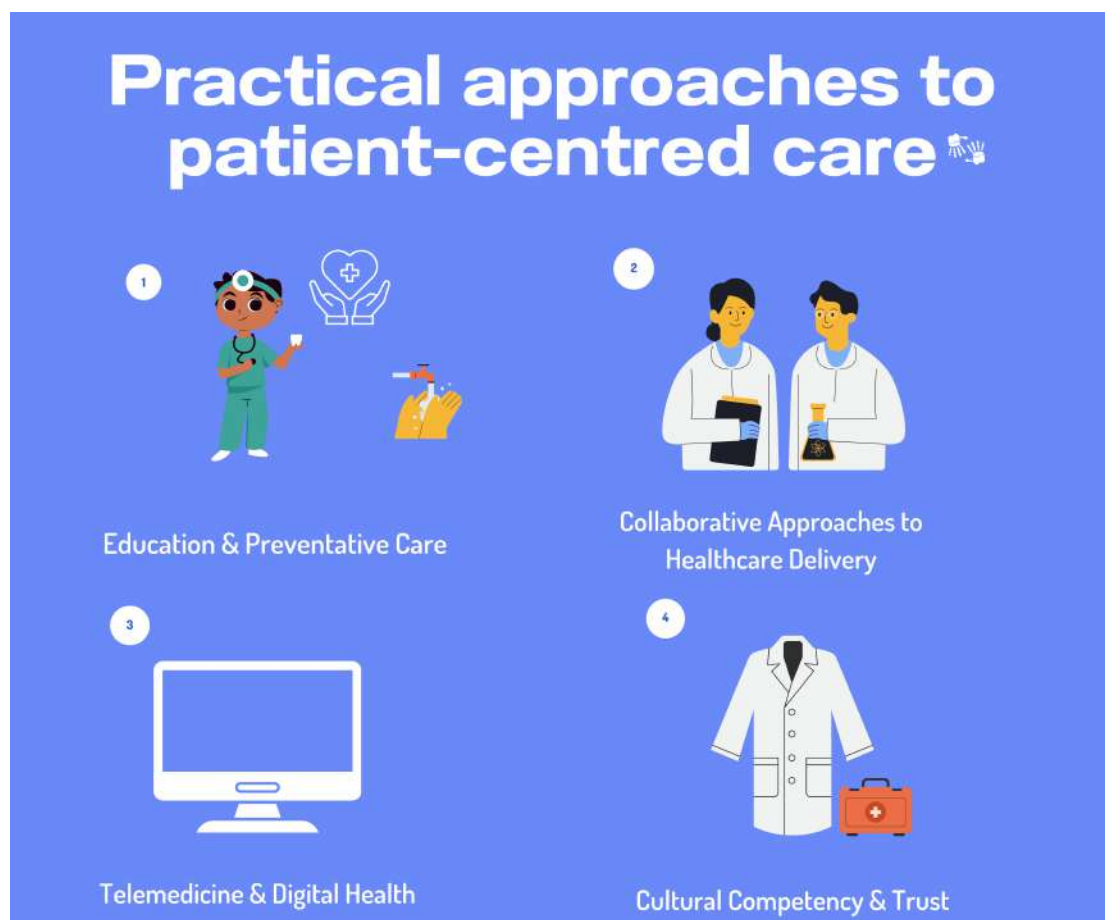
An essential part of our role as healthcare practitioners is to provide patients with clear, evidence-based information that helps them take an active role in their own care. By empowering patients

with the knowledge they need, we can support them in following treatment plans and improving their overall health outcomes.⁴

This involves not only discussing their condition and treatment but also guiding them toward healthier lifestyle choices. In some cases, it may be appropriate to refer patients to a Biokineticist. These exercise professionals can guide patients in becoming more active, as physical activity not only helps to manage existing chronic conditions, but also reduces the risk of developing new ones (prevention).

Compassion

Compassion is a cornerstone of patient care. As healthcare practitioners, we should strive to show sensitivity and empathy towards our patients' individual and social needs, offering comfort and support whenever we can. Showing understanding helps strengthen the patient-practitioner relationship and contributes to both the quality of care and overall well-being.²



INFORMED CONSENT

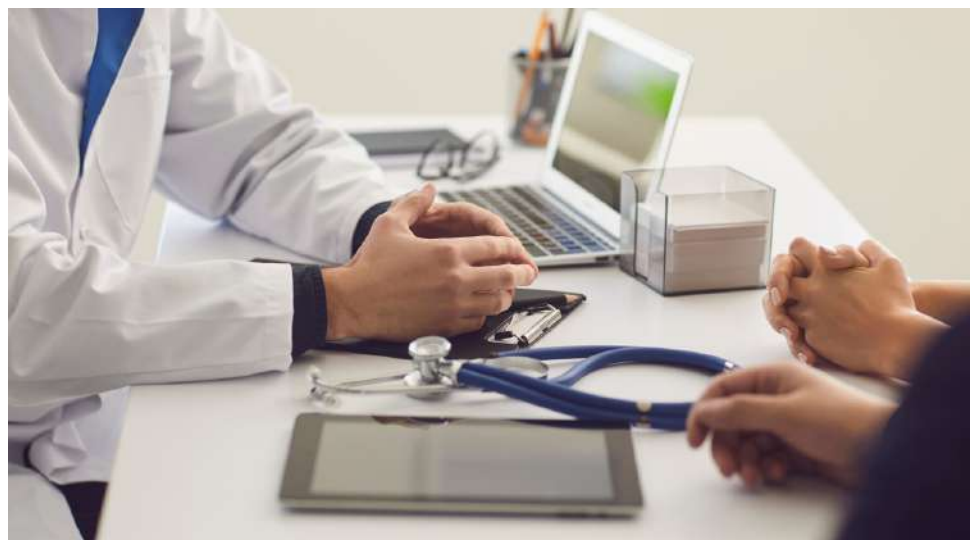
Obtaining informed consent is a fundamental ethical and legal responsibility for healthcare practitioners.

We must always seek informed consent *before* collecting personal and confidential information, such as medical history, performing any examination, or providing treatment. This requirement applies unless there is a medical emergency or, in the case of minors, where a parent or guardian must provide consent.^{4 6}

While the content and details of consent forms may vary, they must provide enough relevant and detailed information that patients may ask for, and need, about the purpose of screening or investigations, risks, and benefits associated with screening, assessment, and treatment before giving their consent.

This also applies *all communication* between healthcare practitioners and patients. When informing them about their health status, diagnosis, condition, treatment options, and prognosis. We should communicate in a way that is easy for them to understand, taking into account their language, literacy, values, and beliefs, unless sharing certain information would not be in their best interest. This not only includes a written consent form, but also verbally explaining the associated benefits, risks, costs, and potential outcomes/consequences of any screening, assessment, or treatment options, empowering patients to make confident, well-informed decisions. It is crucial not to withhold any relevant information, investigations, treatments, or procedures that are in their best interests.⁵

We must always obtain written, informed *financial consent* from patients (or someone acting on their behalf if they are unable to provide consent). This must be done *before* starting any assessment or treatment. This



consent should clearly outline the associated costs, ensuring patients are fully aware of what to expect before any healthcare services proceed⁵. It's essential to keep accurate records of all fees quoted, charged, and paid, as well as any discussions related to the financial aspects of the treatment.¹

The consent form should also be explained verbally to the participant, and include a statement that they have had the opportunity to ask questions and have been given enough information to make an *informed decision*. If visual aids, printed materials, or posters are used to support the explanation of a patient's condition or health status, they should always be accompanied by verbal clarification/explanation from you as the healthcare practitioner. It's important to document any specific questions raised by the patient along with the responses provided. ^{4 1 5 6}

The consent form should also make clear that participants have the right to withdraw at any time. Patients should be informed of their right to refuse treatment, including the potential risks and consequences of such a decision. It is important that medical intervention is never provided without the patient's consent, except in specific situations such as emergencies.^{4 5}

The informed consent process isn't just a one-off – it's ongoing. Lastly, patients should always have access to their medical records.

“Everyone has a right to be given full and accurate information about the nature of one's illnesses, diagnostic procedures, the proposed treatment and risks associated therewith, and the costs involved. This includes: ‘details of costs or charges which the patient may have to meet.’ Thus, for patient to be able to make an informed decision related to seeking and receiving healthcare, accurate and understandable information related to the charges and costs for consultations and treatment must be presented to patients by their health practitioner (usually before such health services are rendered)” (HPCSA).⁵

Advantages of digital informed consent

While the HPCSA has not yet established specific regulations for digital consent, the principles outlined for traditional informed consent—such as transparency, comprehension, complying with data protection laws, maintaining the dignity of patients and the integrity of the consent process, along with record-keeping are applicable to digital informed consent.



Key components to be included in an informed consent document

Purpose of screening or investigations & explanation with enough relevant & detailed information of the screening, test or procedure

Risks, benefits, discomforts, potential outcomes

Financial consent

Freedom of consent & right to refuse treatment

Use of Medical Records, patient confidentiality, and the protection of health and financial Information

Inquiries



PATIENT CONFIDENTIALITY, AND THE PROTECTION OF HEALTH AND FINANCIAL INFORMATION

As healthcare practitioners, we are ethically bound to respect patients' right to privacy, ensuring personal information is only disclosed with the patient's informed consent, a court order, when legally required, or in the patient's best interest.

Every member of the healthcare team shares a duty to protect the patient's personal information, including all financial details related to their treatment, and ensure confidentiality is maintained at all times. Financial discussions should be handled privately, out of the hearing of others to respect the patient's dignity.¹

Disclosure of Information

All aspects of a patient's personal and health information, including medical history, test results, diagnostic details, and disease status, must remain confidential, in line with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA).⁴



Disclosure to anyone outside the healthcare team is only permitted with the patient's informed consent and in compliance with relevant legal requirements.^{4 7}

While other healthcare practitioners may be informed of a patient's health status without a patient's informed consent, as sharing clinical and medical data with those directly involved in patient care is necessary to ensure treatment is in the patient's best interest.

When recording diagnostic information for the purpose of processing claims, or in line with the rules of the medical scheme, patients must provide informed consent for such information to be included on their account.⁴

ADVANTAGES OF DIGITAL INFORMED CONSENT



Remote Access

Allows patients in remote areas to review & sign consent forms online & eliminates the need for in-person visits



Multilingual Support

Provides consent forms in multiple languages to support diverse populations.



Customisation for Disabilities

Includes text-to-speech, adjustable font sizes & screen readers for patients with disabilities.



Reduced Administrative Burden & is Cost Effective

Automates tracking, reducing staff workload & errors, reduces paper usage & ensures easy storage.



Interactive Tools & Patient Empowerment

Integrates videos & infographics to improve patient comprehension, especially for those with low health literacy & enables patients to review consent materials at their own pace



Provides Audit Trails & Links

Links consent documentation to patient records for easy access by healthcare teams.
Ensures accountability & protects patients.



Accuracy

Minimises errors through automated data entry & validation.



Scalability

Handles large volumes of patients, ideal for clinical trials or vaccination campaigns.

Medical schemes are entitled to access treatment records held by healthcare practitioners or health organisations, including information related to diagnosis, treatment, and health status. However, this information cannot be shared with anyone else without the patient's explicit permission⁵.

Patient information may only be disclosed in the following situations:

- With the patient's informed consent.
- When there is a legal or ethical obligation to disclose the information
- It is in the best interest of the patient.²

POTENTIAL CONFLICTS OF INTEREST, REFERRALS AND COMMISSION

Collaboration among healthcare professionals, making appropriate referrals, offering support, and empowering patients to manage their own care are essential for ensuring continuity of treatment. These practices contribute to optimal care and improving health outcomes, particularly for patients with chronic conditions.⁴ However, as healthcare practitioners, we must always prioritise clinical need above all else, ensuring that professional decisions are guided by the best interests of the patient and avoid any pressure on patients or their families.²



Every patient deserves continuous and appropriate care. No patient should be abandoned by a healthcare practitioner or health facility that initially took responsibility for their health, without making an appropriate referral or handover.⁴ Act in the best interests of your patients when making referrals and arranging treatment. Patients referred to another healthcare provider should receive the same level of care and respect as those treated by you.

Avoid over-servicing and only recommend or refer patients for investigations, treatments, devices, or medications that are truly necessary for their care. If registered with multiple councils, boards, or categories within the same board, avoid providing services to a patient in multiple capacities or charging for more than one consultation. ^{4 2}

POPIA BASICS FOR HEALTHCARE PRACTITIONERS



Why It Matters

Following these rules builds trust, protects patient privacy, and keeps you compliant with South African law.



Keep Patient Data Secure

Use strong passwords, encryption & lock physical files in secure cabinets.



Only Collect What You Need

Gather only the information necessary for the patient's care or billing.



Get Consent

Always ask patients before using or sharing their data, unless it's an emergency.



Be Transparent

Tell patients why their data is being collected, how it will be used & who will see it.



Respect Patient Rights

Patients can:

- See their records.
- Request corrections to mistakes.
- Know who has accessed their data.



Interactive Tools & Patient Empowerment

Integrates videos & infographics to improve patient comprehension, especially for those with low health literacy & enables patients to review consent materials at their own pace



Report Breaches Quickly: If data is stolen or leaked, tell:

- The Information Regulator within 72 hours.
- The patient as soon as possible.



Train Your Team

Teach staff to handle patient data responsibly & securely.



Don't Send Data Abroad Without Consent

If sharing data outside South Africa, ensure the country has strong privacy laws, or get patient approval.

Any financial interests in institutions, diagnostic equipment, or services to which you refer patients must be disclosed, both verbally and through a clearly visible notice. Never accept or request any inducement or incentive from colleagues to whom you refer patients, as this could undermine professional judgment or be perceived as such. You should inform your patients if you are employed by, associated with, linked to, or have an interest in any organisation or facility that could create a potential conflict of interest or dual loyalty regarding their care².

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QUESTIONNAIRE

PE6(26)

Back to basics - Ethical principles in healthcare

INSTRUCTIONS

- Read through the article and answer the multiple-choice questions provided below.
- **Some questions may have more than one correct answer;** in which case you must mark **all** the correct answers.

Question 1: Ethics refers to the standards that guide our decisions and actions, based on core values, helping us determine what is right, fair, and just.

- A. TRUE
- B. FALSE

Question 2: Which of the following are correct regarding beneficence? Select all correct options.

- A. Maximise benefits and minimise harm to patient
- B. Do no harm to patient
- C. Taking positive, purposeful actions that prioritise the best interests of our patients
- D. Provide compassionate and competent care in every situation

Question 3: Autonomy is about an individual's right to _____.

- A. Be treated equally
- B. Make informed decisions about their healthcare
- C. Receive maximal benefits from the care provided
- D. Receive compassion regardless of their economic situation

Question 4: All of the following are true regarding veracity **EXCEPT**

- A. Helps build trust
- B. Creates a relationship where patients feel confident that their care is grounded in honesty and integrity
- C. Is about being truthful and providing accurate information to patients
- D. Withholding certain information

Question 5: Which of the following is correct regarding a situation where a patient's actions have contributed to their condition?

- A. This is a reason to refuse or delay treatment
- B. This should never be a reason to refuse or delay treatment
- C. This will affect our decisions on how to treat the patient

Question 6: An essential part of our role as healthcare practitioners is to provide patients with clear, evidence-based information that helps them take an active role in their own care.

- A. TRUE
- B. FALSE

Question 7: When should we seek informed consent?

- A. Before providing emergency medical care
- B. Before collecting personal and confidential information
- C. After collecting personal and confidential information
- D. After screenings or investigations

Question 8: It's essential to keep accurate records of which of the following? Select all correct options.

- A. Date and time of appointments
- B. Fees quoted for and charged
- C. Fees paid
- D. Any discussions related to the financial aspects of treatment

Question 9: It's _____ to document any specific questions raised by the patient along with the responses provided?

- A. Important
- B. Optional
- C. Not important

Question 10: Which of the following is **NOT** an advantage of digital informed consent?

- A. Multilingual support
- B. Customisation for disabilities
- C. Interactive tools and patient empowerment
- D. Regional access

Question 11: Healthcare practitioners are ethically bound to respect patients' right to privacy, ensuring personal information is only disclosed with the patient's informed consent, a court order, or when legally required or in the patient's best interest.

- A. TRUE
- B. FALSE

Question 12: Which of the following are POPIA basics for healthcare practitioners? Select all correct options.

- A. Keep patient data secure
- B. Report data breaches quickly
- C. All staff should be trained to handle data responsibly and securely
- D. Only the healthcare practitioner should have access to patient information

Question 13: Healthcare practitioners should avoid all of the following **EXCEPT**?

- A. Accept payments, gifts or rewards in exchange for purchasing or selling products or materials used in professional practice
- B. Pay commission to people who recommended patients
- C. Share fees with another person who hasn't directly contributed to providing the service for which the fees were charged
- D. Charging for or accepting fees for services provided

Question 14: What should a healthcare practitioner or health facility that initially took responsibility for a patient's health do if they can no longer provide the necessary care?

- A. Abandon the patient
- B. Ask the patient to find another healthcare practitioner/ facility
- C. Make an appropriate referral or handover

Question 15: As a healthcare practitioner what is your responsibility if you are employed by, associated with, linked to, or have an interest in any organisation or facility that could create a potential conflict of interest or dual loyalty regarding their care?

- A. You should inform your patients
- B. Keep this information confidential
- C. Ask the patient to find another healthcare practitioner/ facility

THE END



FOCUS ON HEALTH

www.foh-cpd.co.za

Cell: 074 230 3874

Tel: 012 653 0133 / 2373 / 2394

Mon-Fri: 08:00-16:00

400 Theuns van Niekerk Street

Wierda Park

0157

PO Box 71

Wierda Park

0149

MEMBER INFO

(Complete sections marked with an asterisk *)

*FOH number

*HPCSA number

ID number

Personal detail changes

I hereby declare that the completion of this document is my own effort without any assistance.

SIGNED:

DATE:

This activity is accredited for **THREE (3) ETHICS** CEU'S. You have to achieve 70% to pass this activity.

ANSWER SHEET

PE6(26)

Back to basics - Ethical principles in healthcare

*Time spent on activity						hour		min				
	A	B	C	D	E		A	B	C	D	E	
1						8						
2						9						
3						10						
4						11						
5						12						
6						13						
7						14						
						15						

How relevant was the content of this activity to your scope of practice?			
			
Not at all	Somewhat	Mostly	Extremely

RETURN ANSWER SHEET TO

Online members, complete your answer sheet online

CPD PORTAL: <http://foh-cpd.co.za/cpd-online/cpd-user> (Username: FOH number & Password: ID)

(Results are available immediately)

Email or hard copy members, complete your answer sheet online or return it to:

WHATSAPP: 074 230 3874 EMAIL: info@foh-cpd.co.za

(Results will be sent via email)

You will receive a confirmation of receipt either by Whatsapp or email within 12-24 hours, if not received please send again.

Have a suggestion or comment?

Send it to us on EMAIL or WHATSAPP