

Principles of ethical practice

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Nearly 2500 years ago, Socrates asserted that ethical principles are the essence of humanity; living life without them would be like wandering in search of direction without the sun to guide us. In today's world, guidance options are as close as our phones. Even so, living and working with ethical guidance remains as valuable now as it was in Socrates' time.

In the practice of the noble professions, including orthodontics, core ethical principles are constant. The specifics of ethical practice, however, require periodic modifications to remain consistent with changing laws and transformations in societal values. The American Association of Orthodontists' (AAO) previous Principles of Ethics and Code of Professional Conduct document (Principles) was adopted in 1994 and amended in 2009. In April 2017, the AAO's House of Delegates adopted a fundamental rewrite of the Principles that clarifies our organization's mission, values, and core beliefs while linking them to standards of professional conduct. This revised code of ethics better articulates the desired behavior and values that the AAO wishes to foster in all members and their employees. I suggest that you go to the Member side of the AAO's Web site to become familiar with the new document. You can accomplish this by first clicking on the Legal and Advocacy tab at the top of the page, then click on the Ethics Resources tab on the left side of the page, and finally open the document entitled Principles of Ethics and Code of Professional Conduct.

In 2015, the AAO's Council on Membership, Ethics and Judicial Concerns (COMEJC) completed a formal review of our Principles; it indicated that the 1994 document was in sore need of updating to bring it into alignment with present-day laws and societal norms.

With consideration and influence from various sources, the COMEJC developed and proposed the Principles document that was adopted in 2017. The updated document is divided into 3 sections beginning with the Introduction and Preamble followed by the section outlining the Principles of Ethics, Code of Professional Conduct, Advisory Opinions, and finishes with Disciplinary Proceedings.

One of the most important adaptations in the document concerns how the AAO defines the requirements for membership in the organization. The revised document defines an active member only by successful completion of the full curriculum at an accredited educational program. This change allows members with a dual specialty to enjoy all benefits of Active Membership status. In addition, our members have new freedom to provide additional, expanded aspects of the care that patients may require for successful treatment. Finally, since each dental license and the accompanying privilege to practice depend on compliance with the laws of the jurisdiction in which the member practices, language has been included to ensure that these Principles comply with local laws.

The COMEJC encourages every AAO member to become familiar with this updated “map” of the Principles of Ethics and Code of Professional Conduct. The AAO's Principles intend to provide valuable guidance toward ethical practice that will enhance each practitioner's productivity and enjoyment of their practice while providing patients with the quality care they deserve.

These Principles must be part of every AAO member's core that consists of our ethics, our education, and our experience. This core is what sets AAO members apart from all the rest.

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