

Dental Ethics

Dental Ethics: An Introduction

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Lecture 1

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Dental Ethics: An Introduction

What does it mean to be a trusted dental professional? Ethics forms the moral backbone of dentistry — guiding conduct, judgment, and the relationship between dentist and patient. This presentation explores the foundations, core values, and unique challenges of dental ethics.

PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

DENTISTRY

CORE VALUES



It's a careful, systematic reflection on moral decisions and behavior

What Is Ethics?

Etymology & Meaning

The word **ethics** comes from the Greek *ethos*, meaning **character or conduct**. It is often used interchangeably with **moral**, from the Latin *mores*, meaning **customs or habits**.

Ethics vs. Morality

Ethics is the study of morality. It's a careful, systematic reflection on moral decisions and behavior. Morality is the value dimension of human decision-making. Ethics is primarily a matter of *knowing*, morality is a matter of *doing*. Their relationship lies in ethics providing rational criteria for how people should decide and behave.

❏ Ethics arise from **moral obligation**.

Ethics provides rational criteria for how people should decide and behave.

Decision Making: Navigating Ethical Choices

While dental associations provide **general ethical directives**, dentists frequently encounter unique situations that demand personal judgment. *Ethical decision-making* in dentistry has evolved to encompass not just individual patient care, but also broader societal needs and the challenges posed by new technologies.



Professional Guidance

Codes of ethics and policy statements offer a consensus on professional conduct, serving as a foundational guide for practitioners.



Evolving Landscape

Modern dental ethics considers not only the individual patient, but also fairness to society, proper use of resources, patient data, and new technologies.



Individual Responsibility

Dentists are ultimately responsible for their ethical decisions, applying core values like compassion and competence to complex situations.

Understanding the approaches to ethical issues, both rational (logic, evidence, ethical principles), and non-rational (emotions, intuition, culture, religion, personal experiences), is crucial for developing sound judgment.



The Complexity of Applying Ethics

Applying ethical principles in ***specific situations*** is often problematic. Dentists, patients, family members, and oral health personnel may disagree about the right course of action. Moreover, developments in dental science, technology, and changing societal values constantly pose **new ethical challenges**.

Multiple Stakeholders

Dentists, patients, families, and oral health staff may all hold differing views on what is right in a given situation.

Evolving Science

Advances in dental technology and science continuously create novel ethical dilemmas that did not previously exist.

Dental Ethics & the Law

Dental ethics is closely related to law. In most countries, laws specify how dentists must handle ethical issues in patient care and research, and licensing officials can *punish* ethical violations. However, **ethics should not be confused with law**. Ethics arise from **moral obligation**.

Where They Align

Usually, the requirements of dental ethics and law are similar. Both aim to protect patients and uphold professional standards.

Where They Differ

- Laws differ significantly between countries; ethics is generally applicable across national boundaries.
- Ethics often have **higher standards** than the law.
- Where unjust laws conflict with ethical principles, dentists should work to **change the laws**.



Dentistry: Both a Science and an Art

The Science

Science deals with what can be observed and measured. A competent dentist recognizes signs of oral disease and knows how to restore good oral health. However, scientific dentistry has its limits — particularly regarding human individuality, culture, religion, freedom, rights, and responsibilities.

The Art

The art of dentistry involves applying dental science and technology to individual patients, families, and communities — no two of which are identical.

The major differences among individuals are **non-physiological**, and it is in recognizing and addressing these that **ethics, humanities, and social sciences play a major role.**



Dentistry: Both a Science and an Art

Example

Two patients have the same dental problem: a severely damaged tooth.

Patient A wants to save the tooth at any cost because appearance and keeping natural teeth are very important to them.

Patient B has limited financial resources and prefers extraction because they cannot afford complex treatment.

The **dental science** tells the dentist what treatments are clinically possible.

The **art of dentistry** involves understanding each patient's *circumstances, values, concerns, and priorities* and then helping them make an informed decision.

Everyday Examples in Dentistry

A patient is late for an appointment

1. The dentist could simply refuse treatment.
2. But perhaps the patient came from a distant area, had transportation problems, or was caring for a child.
3. **Ethics/humanity:** understand the situation while still being fair to other patients.

A patient does not brush regularly

1. The scientific advice is to brush twice daily.
2. But simply telling the patient "you need to brush better" may not work.
3. The patient may lack knowledge, motivation, time, or proper brushing technique.
4. **Art:** understand *why* and provide realistic, personalized advice.

A patient asks, "Can you extract this tooth instead of doing a root canal?"

1. Both options may be clinically possible.
2. The dentist needs to understand the patient's priorities, finances, expectations, and concerns.
3. **Ethics:** explain benefits, risks, alternatives, and respect the patient's decision.

A patient cannot afford the ideal treatment

1. The clinically ideal treatment may be expensive.
2. The dentist should not simply say, "You cannot afford it."
3. **Ethics:** discuss reasonable alternatives and help the patient make an informed choice.

1.A patient wants very white teeth

1. The dentist knows what whitening can safely achieve.
2. The patient's expectation may be unrealistic.
3. **Art:** communicate honestly and manage expectations rather than simply providing what the patient requests.

2.A child **refuses to open** their mouth

1. Scientifically, the dentist knows exactly what treatment is required.
2. But forcing the child may create fear and damage future dental behavior.
3. **Art:** use age-appropriate communication, patience, behavior guidance, and parental involvement.

3.A patient asks **many questions**

1. Two patients may need exactly the same filling.
2. One wants a detailed explanation; another prefers a short explanation.
3. **Art:** adjust communication to the individual while still providing informed consent.

4.A patient is embarrassed about **poor oral hygiene**

1. The dentist needs to discuss plaque, caries, or periodontal disease.
2. A judgmental approach may make the patient avoid future dental care.

3. Humanity: communicate without shame or humiliation.

11.A patient has strong dental beliefs

- For example, the patient may believe that extraction is always better than saving a tooth.
- Art:** understand the belief, correct misinformation respectfully, and provide evidence-based advice.

12.A patient wants treatment immediately

- The dentist may identify several problems.
- However, the patient may only have time for emergency treatment today.
- Art:** prioritize treatment according to clinical urgency *and* the patient's circumstances.

13.A patient misses appointments repeatedly

- The dentist could label the patient "non-compliant."
- But there may be work, transportation, family, financial, or communication difficulties.
- Art:** understanding the patient's social circumstances can lead to a more effective approach.

14. A patient is embarrassed about missing teeth

- Scientifically, the dentist can discuss dentures, bridges, or implants .
- But the patient may be concerned about appearance, social interactions, cost, or fear .
- Ethics** :understand the emotional and social impact, not just the missing teeth .

15. A patient wants treatment that the dentist considers unnecessary

- For example, requesting **cosmetic treatment** for a tooth that is clinically healthy .
- Ethics** *the dentist should not perform inappropriate treatment simply because the patient requests it .*

16. A patient asks the dentist not to tell their family about treatment

- The patient may be an adult who wants privacy .
- Ethics**: .tnatropmi emoceb ymonotua rof tcepsr dna ytilaitnedifnoc

17. A patient has **bad breath**

- The dentist must discuss a potentially embarrassing issue .
- Art:** tneitap eht sekam taht yaw a ni ro ylevitisnes rehtie detacinummoc eb nac noitamrofni emas eht not feel humiliated .

18. A patient is unhappy with the **result**

- Clinically, the treatment may have been successful .
- But the patient's expectations may not have been met .
- Art:** .noitulos etairporppa na enimreted dna ‘noitautis eht nialpxe ‘ezihtapme ‘netsil

Three patients have the same cavity. The science tells how to diagnose and treat the cavity. But one patient is **anxious**, an other has **financial difficulties**, an other has **limited understanding of oral health**. The dentist must use different approaches with each patient, that is the art of Dentistry.

What's Special About Dentistry?

In virtually every part of the world, being a dentist has meant something **special**. Patients come for relief from pain and restoration of oral health. They allow dentists to see, touch, and manipulate their bodies and disclose personal information — all because **they trust their dentists to act in their best interests**.



A Recognized Profession

Dentistry is a respected profession built on public trust and a commitment to patient welfare above self-interest.



A Commercial Enterprise

Dentists also employ their skills to earn a living. This creates a *potential tension* between professionalism and commercial interests.



The Balance Challenge

Aggressive advertising or overemphasis on high-income cosmetic procedures can diminish public trust, reducing dentists to mere entrepreneurs.

The Status of Dentistry Today

"The dentist should act in a manner which will enhance the prestige and reputation of the profession."

Because the *commercial aspect* of dentistry sometimes **prevails** over the *professional*, the status of dentists is **deteriorating in some countries**. Patients who once accepted advice unquestioningly now sometimes ask dentists to defend recommendations that differ from information found online or from other practitioners. Despite these challenges, dentistry continues to be **highly valued** by those who need its services and continues to attract gifted, hardworking, and dedicated students.



The Three Core Values of Dentistry

To meet the expectations of patients, students, and the public, dentists must know and exemplify three core values. These, along with respect for fundamental human rights, serve as the **foundation of dental ethics**.



1. Compassion

Understanding and concern for another person's distress. Patients respond better when they perceive the dentist appreciates their concerns and is treating *them*, not just their illness.



2. Competence

A very high degree of competence is both expected and required. Dentists must continually maintain scientific knowledge, technical skills, *and* ethical knowledge as new issues arise.



3. Autonomy

Both clinical autonomy for dentists and patient autonomy — meaning patients should be the ultimate decision-makers in matters affecting themselves — are central to modern dental ethics.

PAUSE

Take a deep Breath...

Core Values in Depth

Compassion

Defined as understanding and concern for another's distress. The dentist must identify symptoms and their causes, and genuinely want to help the patient achieve relief.

Competence

A lack of competence can have serious consequences. Given rapid advances in dental knowledge, maintaining competence — scientific, technical, *and* ethical — is a continual challenge.

Autonomy

Individual dentists have traditionally enjoyed a high degree of clinical autonomy. The profession collectively determines standards of education and practice. At the same time, there is widespread acceptance of **patient autonomy** — patients should be the ultimate decision-makers in matters affecting themselves. Clinical and professional autonomy benefits not just dentists but patients as well, *freeing dentists from government and corporate restraints on providing optimal treatment.*

The Dental Code of Ethics

Beyond its core values, dental ethics is distinguished from general ethics by being **publicly proclaimed in a code of ethics**. Codes vary by country but share many common features. Dentists commit to:

→ Patient-First Commitment

Dentists will consider the interests of their patients **above their own** in all professional decisions and actions.

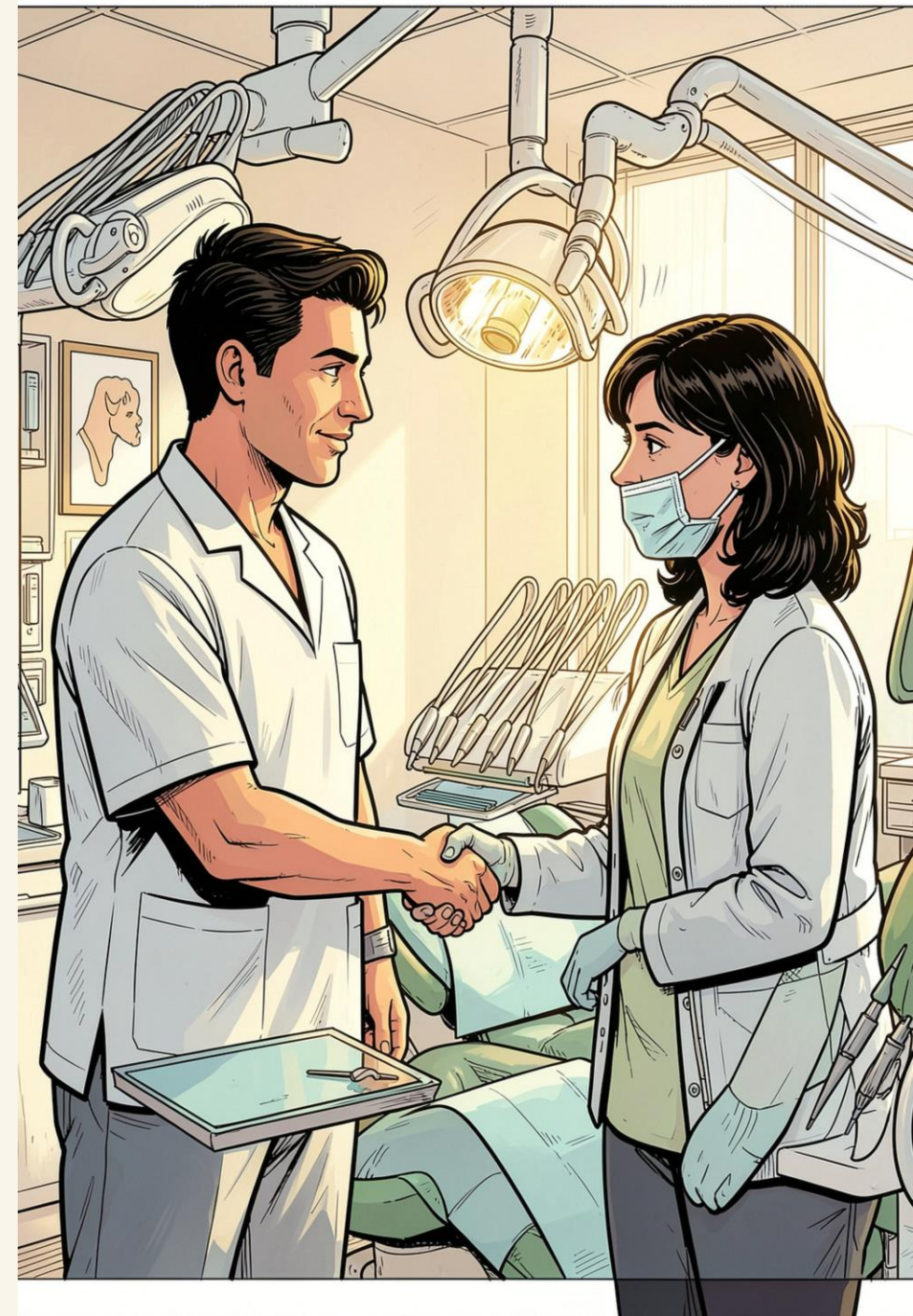
→ Non-Discrimination

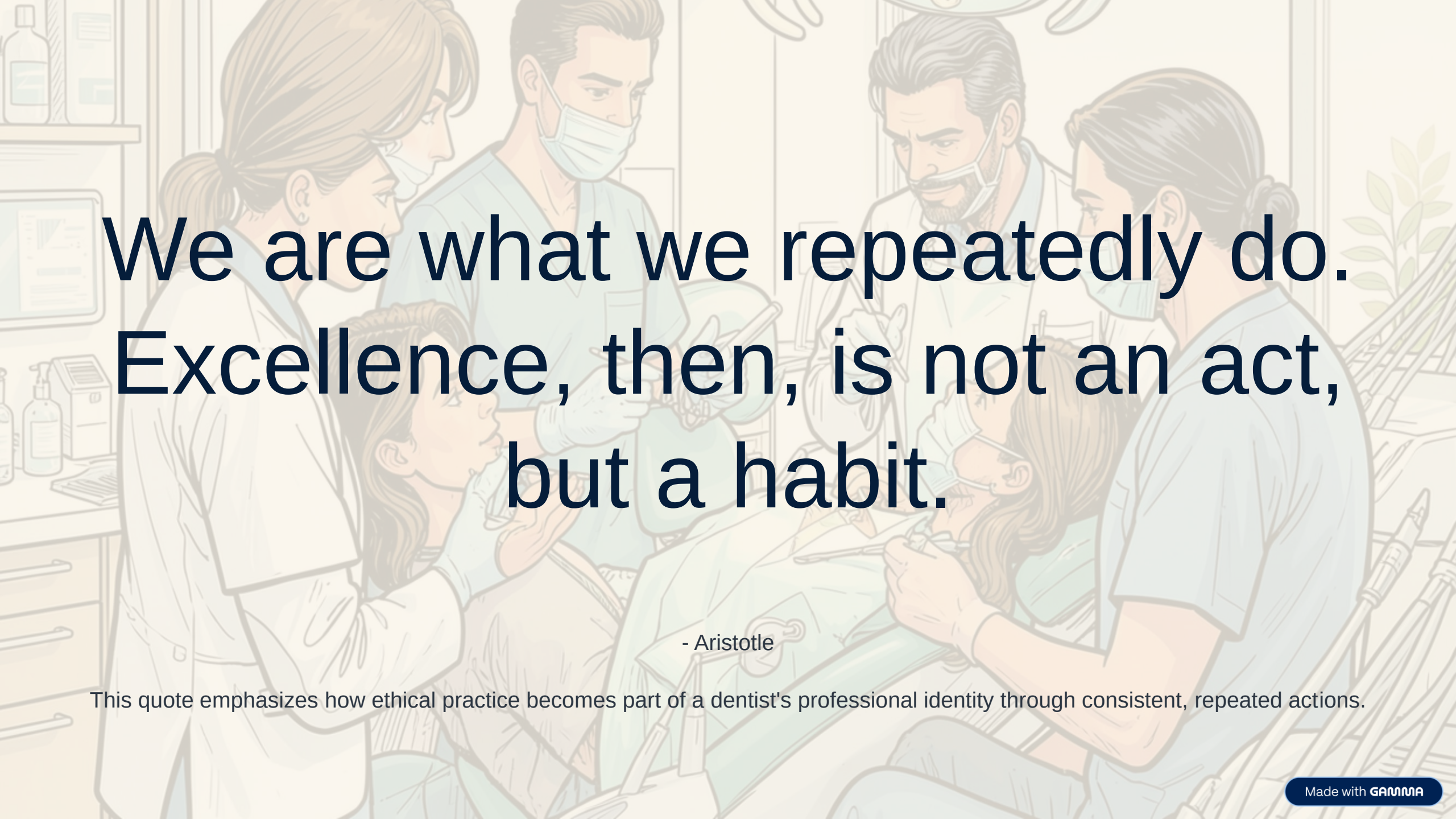
Dentists will not discriminate against patients on the basis of race, religion, or other human rights grounds.

→ Confidentiality

Dentists will **protect the confidentiality** of all patient information disclosed during the course of care.

- ❏ **These commitments, grounded in compassion, competence, and autonomy, define what it truly means to be a dental professional.**

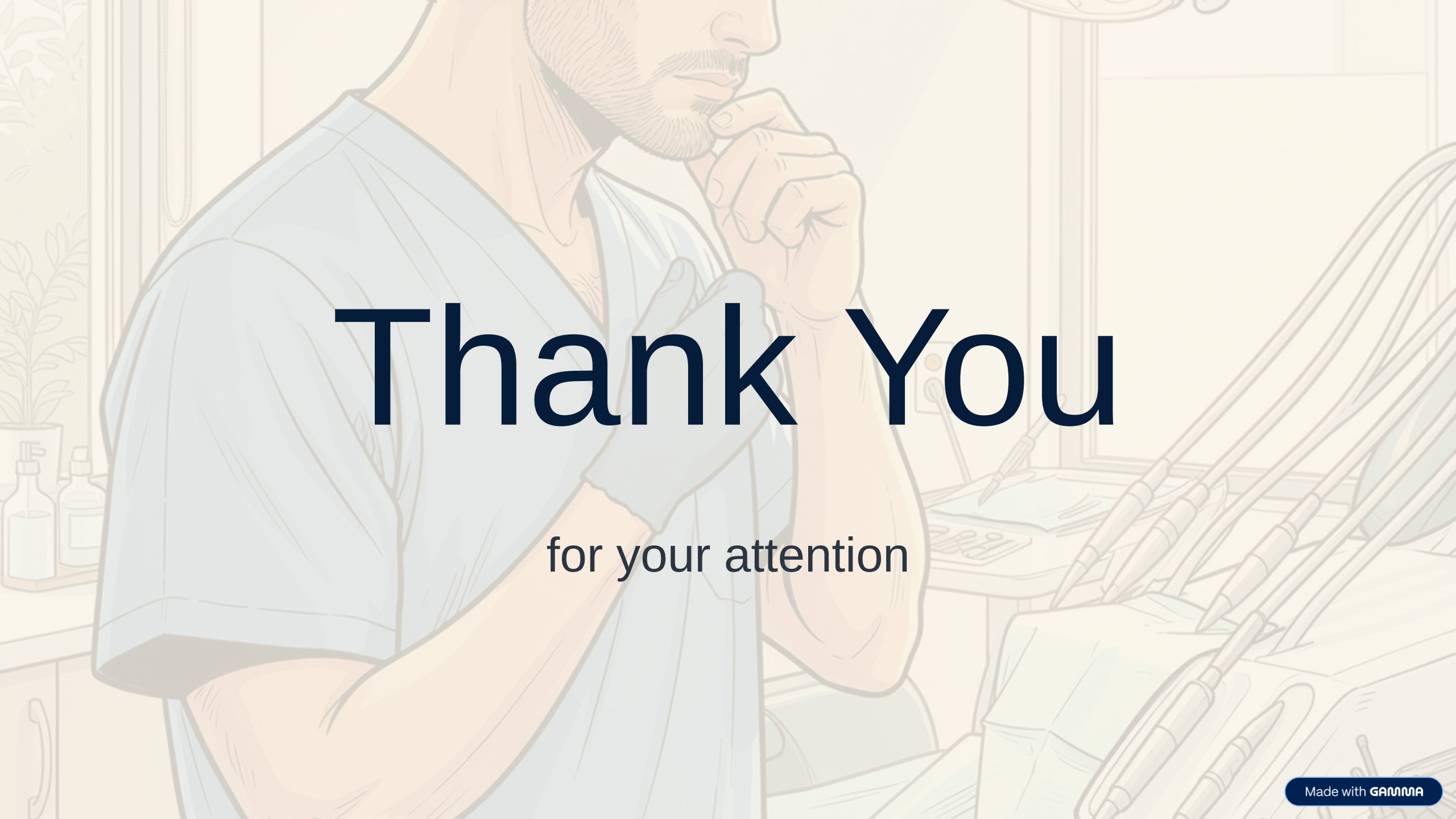




**We are what we repeatedly do.
Excellence, then, is not an act,
but a habit.**

- Aristotle

This quote emphasizes how ethical practice becomes part of a dentist's professional identity through consistent, repeated actions.



Thank You

for your attention