

# Professionalism in South African Dental Practice

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As we navigate the complex landscape of oral healthcare in South Africa, we find ourselves at a critical juncture where our collective wisdom and ethical commitment are challenged. This editorial is a call to action—a reminder of our paramount responsibility to our patients and to the field of dentistry itself. We must address a pressing issue that has, at times, remained hidden beneath the surface: the dangers of neglect in the treatment of our patients' dental conditions.

Within the context of our busy practices and the intricacies of patient care, it is all too common for the early signs and symptoms of dental conditions to be inadvertently overlooked. It's essential to recognize that even seemingly minor dental issues can evolve into major complications if not addressed promptly. The silent menace of delayed treatment has the potential to escalate unintended consequences to the oral health of the patient. From an ethical perspective, our commitment to the well-being of our patients should drive us to take a proactive stance on early identification and intervention. The principle of non-maleficence, the obligation to "do no harm," holds significant weight in dentistry. Delayed treatment can lead to exacerbated pain and suffering, as well as increased

risks of complications, which might have been prevented if addressed promptly.

One concerning practice that has crept into our profession is the overprescription of antibiotics that seemingly serves to defer treatment to a date more suitable to the practitioner. While antibiotics have their place in dental care, they should never be seen as a panacea for deferring necessary dental procedures. This trend raises a multitude of ethical concerns, particularly regarding the principle of justice, which entails fair and equitable access to healthcare.

When patients are sent home with antibiotics, they may face additional costs, potential complications, and in some cases even worsening conditions. The ethical alarm bells reverberate most intensely in the domain of justice. Justice in healthcare demands the impartial allocation of resources and equitable access to quality care for all individuals. By overprescribing antibiotics and postponing essential dental treatments, practitioners inadvertently introduce disparities into the healthcare equation. Patients who are administered antibiotics and sent home without prompt dental intervention may unwittingly face a multitude of adverse consequences.



Financial burdens represent one facet of the injustice. The additional costs incurred by patients for prescriptions and follow-up visits due to deferred treatments can be substantial. In many cases, individuals with limited financial resources are disproportionately affected, potentially deterring them from seeking the care they desperately need. This financial strain not only undermines the principles of affordability and accessibility in healthcare but also exacerbates existing healthcare disparities. Beyond the financial implications, there is the risk of complications. Dental conditions, when left unaddressed, tend to deteriorate. The temporary relief provided by antibiotics for example, is fleeting, and the underlying dental issues continue to worsen. Consequently, patients who endure postponed dental treatments run an increased risk of experiencing exacerbated symptoms, which might have been otherwise preventable.

In the most severe scenarios, delayed treatments can lead to the unanticipated worsening of conditions, exemplifying a stark violation of the ethical principle of non-maleficence. In the pursuit of mitigating immediate inconveniences or streamlining appointment schedules, practitioners inadvertently expose their patients to the threat of worsening oral health issues. By overprescribing antibiotics and deferring the requisite dental procedures, a well-intentioned albeit misguided endeavor to alleviate short-term discomfort paradoxically places the patients at an increased risk of enduring more harm.

To address the dangers of neglect in the treatment of patients' dental conditions, we must recommit ourselves to the principles that underpin our profession. Some of the points to consider in this regard will include:

#### A. Early Detection and Education

- Embrace continuing education to stay abreast of the latest diagnostic tools and techniques.

- Advocate for regular dental check-ups to promote early detection of diseases and abnormalities.
- Prioritize patient education to enhance awareness of the importance of prompt treatment.

#### B. Ethical Practice

- Uphold the principles of non-maleficence and beneficence by prioritizing patients' well-being over convenience.
- Strive for equitable access to care, ensuring that financial factors do not hinder the timely receipt of treatment.

#### C. Collaboration and Guidance

- Foster a culture of collaboration among dental professionals, encouraging open dialogue and shared expertise.
- Seek guidance from ethical committees and professional bodies to address potential gray areas in treatment decisions.

#### D. Advocacy and Awareness

- Engage in public outreach and advocacy to increase awareness about the dangers of neglect in dental treatment.
- Collaborate with patient advocacy groups to strengthen the call for timely and appropriate care.

As professionals dedicated to the health and well-being of our patients, we must rise above the pressures of time and economics to fulfil our ethical obligations. The dangers of neglect in dental treatment are real, and they demand our collective attention.

By embracing early detection, practicing ethically, collaborating, and advocating for awareness, we can chart a path forward that ensures that the smiles of our patients reflect not only their health but also our unwavering commitment to their welfare. Let us as dental practitioners in South Africa stand united in our mission to provide the best possible care to our patients, never forgetting the ethical principles that guide our profession.

