

Professional competencies of the newly qualified dental practitioner

Guidance note:
Social responsibility
July 2023

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Introduction

Australian Dental Council (ADC) guidance notes aim to provide helpful information for education providers in specific areas where our standards have recently changed.

This includes the following standards:

- ADC Professional competencies of the newly qualified dental practitioner (the Competencies), effective from 1 July 2023.
- ADC Accreditation standards for dental practitioner programs (the Standards), which became effective from 2021.

Guidance notes are not definitive or binding documents, nor are they intended to be prescriptive.

What is social responsibility?

Dental practitioners have a responsibility to the communities they serve to behave in a professional and ethical manner, and it is important that public safety and trust in health professionals is maintained.¹

The Competencies define the relationship between care at an individual level and the broader societal context to further improve dental practitioners' readiness to enter an increasingly complex health system.

A focus on person-centred care requires a broader understanding of the social determinants of health and how health needs are prioritised by all those involved in the delivery of health care. Prioritising health needs is a shared responsibility and requires input from health practitioners, health service organisations, government, and the broader public, including patients.

Dental practitioners play a role in addressing the inequities of healthcare access as well as the responsible provision of care as it relates to economic and environmental impacts of the health system.

Relevant professional competencies

Previous versions of the Competencies did not explicitly reference social accountability of dental practitioners.

There has been a change in the name of Domain 1 to 'Social responsibility and professionalism', which recognises the level of control that a newly qualified practitioner can exert, while also considering that professional practice is undertaken within a social context.

The change of title aims to reinforce that for trust in the profession to be maintained, a practitioner must act in a way that meets the expectations not just of the profession, but also of the broader community in which the practitioner works. This Domain name demonstrates the interconnect between responsibility to serve the needs of the broader society and to behave in a way that also meets with the expectations of the professions.

The Competencies now include the following:

Domain 1: Social responsibility and professionalism

Newly qualified dental practitioners must be able to:

- demonstrate that the interests of the person receiving care are paramount in all decisions and actions
- recognise the importance of self-determined decision-making, partnership and collaboration in healthcare which is driven by the individual, family and community
- recognise the environmental impacts of health care provision and use resources responsibly, making decisions that support environmentally sustainable healthcare

Why is being a socially responsible practitioner important?

There is an increasing focus on the role healthcare professionals play in addressing the environmental impacts of the health system and the need for dental practitioners to practise in a socially responsible way.

As noted by the Australian Healthcare and Hospitals Association (AHHA)'s Climate Change and Health Position Statement, Australia's health sector is directly responsible for 7% of carbon emissions in Australia, providing significant scope for the sector to reduce its carbon footprint.²

The health impacts of climate change are increasingly apparent and changes to health practice have a role to play in addressing this challenge in conjunction with improving the sustainability of the healthcare system. Profiling the active decision-making role of dental practitioners on dental equipment and consumables, and the influence of these choices on carbon emissions and impact on the environment, provides a way for the dental professions to assist in addressing this challenge.³

The Minamata Convention on Mercury is another example of the potential to minimise the environmental impacts of dental care.³ The Convention was signed by the Australian Government in October 2013 and seeks to protect human health and the environment from emissions caused by humans and releases of mercury and mercury compounds through a reduction in the use of amalgam.

A broader understanding of the societal impact of health practice is critical to develop socially responsible dental practitioners with the necessary foundation to deliver effective healthcare.

Guidance for education providers

To become and remain accredited with the ADC, programs are required to demonstrate that their 'design, delivery and resourcing enable students to achieve the required Professional competencies' (Accreditation standards; Domain 3). This includes demonstrating that program learning outcomes address and assess all the required Competencies (Accreditation standards; 3.2; 5.2).

To meet the ADC's Standards in this area, education providers should consider how students can be best prepared throughout the curriculum to be socially responsible dental practitioners. The experiences students have, how they are delivered and how the relevant Competencies are assessed are likely to vary between programs depending on several factors including the profession and program – for example, whether it is a pre-registration or specialist program.

We do not prescribe exactly how a program should provide opportunities for students to best prepare students to become socially responsible dental practitioners. However, some approaches might include, for example:

- modules focused on the implementation of sustainable practice, which could include examples such as:
 - reducing the number of dental appointments patients need, or having them attend for more than one health concern
 - reducing the consumption of dental materials
 - implementation of paperless dental practices
 - reducing waste (e.g. by using digital X-rays)
 - switching off equipment when not in use or installation of energy saving light switches
- inclusion of training in the use of mercury-free restoration alternatives and promulgating best management practices for mercury
- integration of the principles on social responsibility into ethics and professionalism course content
- modules covering safe use of medicines (e.g. opioids and antibiotic prescription)
- introduction of assessment tasks that test students' knowledge and understanding of social responsibility.

Education providers are encouraged to consider how they can best prepare students for socially responsible practice and supporting sustainable healthcare delivery, while meeting the changing healthcare needs of populations.

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