



# Ethics and the Instrument Technician: Their Role in Quality and Safety

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## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define ethics and their vital role in quality healthcare and service delivery
2. Discuss ethical qualities in the healthcare environment
3. Explore ethical concerns when handling and processing instruments

**E**thics are the moral principles that govern a person's behavior. In other words, ethics are the guide to right and wrong behavior. Ethics are essential not only in daily life but also in one's professional life. Unethical people are usually not trusted or well respected whereas people who continually strive to lead an ethical life are typically respected and tend to advance in the workplace faster. This lesson discusses the differences between professional and personal ethics. It explores behaviors considered ethical in the healthcare industry and those that are expected practice for the Sterile Processing (SP) area.

## Objective 1: Define ethics and their vital role in quality healthcare and service delivery

Ethics can be defined as a set of moral principles, beliefs and values that guide individuals in making the right choices. This refers to what is good and bad and includes moral duty and obligation.

Moral duty and obligation involve acting in a certain way that relates to right and wrong, such as being positive and pro-social, as opposed to being negative and anti-social.

Ethics provide guidance, conduct and a better workplace for everyone on the team. All professions abide by a code of ethics, including specific work expectations. SP technicians have legal and ethical responsibilities to patients, doctors and co-workers. Additionally, ethics are codes that are not optional. Ethical actions occur when conduct conforms to accepted and professional standards. When ethical existence is present, the workplace and relationships benefit.

Importantly, ethics should govern and guide how instrument technicians act and make decisions. Personal beliefs, work commitment, and religious practices can complicate instrument technicians' conduct. Today, conflicts between what one is expected to do and what one personally believes can



affect judgment. How these conflicts are handled can impact the department, other employees, the healthcare facility, and most importantly, the patient. Regardless of the challenges SP professionals face every day, facility standards of conduct and departmental policies and procedures must always be followed.

Scientific information and technology continually evolve, and standards and guidelines must evolve with them. At the same time, technicians face near-constant change personally and professionally, which can be challenging. In a healthcare facility, change is often implemented as soon as possible. Timelines are established by the facility, and technicians must accept and implement changes as required. Accepting professional change is done for the patient, facility and co-workers, and it demonstrates professional ethics.

Politics in the workplace can be a source of conflict and create problems when personal beliefs differ from those of the organization or one's co-workers. Exhibiting professional ethics means understanding that all employees' goals are to support the healthcare facility's mission. Personal views should not become a roadblock for professional behavior.

Fairness is a quality where decisions are free from judgment, bias and discrimination. All people expect to be treated fairly. Professional ethics show no favoritism or judgment regardless of a person's status in the organization, whether employee, patient or visitor.

Other conflicts may arise in day-to-day activities; however, respect is the foundation for effective conflict resolution. Showing employees respect, expecting all staff members to respect

their leaders and co-workers, regardless of their differences, and adhering to policies and procedures allows a department to run smoothly. Personal beliefs and judgment must always be put aside in the Sterile Processing department (SPD) and when working with interdisciplinary colleagues. *Note: While ethical behavior helps improve relationships and promote positive outcomes, it will not always prevent unfavorable situations with co-workers and customers.*

### **Objective 2: Discuss ethical qualities in the healthcare environment**

All healthcare professionals must uphold ethical guidelines and principles to provide appropriate service support and medical care. The American Medical Association (AMA) developed specific Principles of Ethics that all medical professionals should maintain. Basic rules and principles provide ethical guidelines for the medical profession and address these essential concepts:

- No intentional or needless harm or injury should be created for the patient.
- A physician should develop a care plan that provides the most benefits to the patient relative to other alternatives.
- A patient must indicate a willingness to accept the proposed treatment if possible. The issue of informed consent means that patients are informed about all benefits or risks related to specific treatments or procedures (this is related to this ethical principle).
- Further, medical benefits should be equally distributed so patients with similar needs and in similar situations receive fair treatment.

Although the aforementioned concepts address direct patient care, they can be applied similarly to all healthcare professionals and departments within the healthcare organization. In the SPD, ethical issues are a critical part of the job and factor into quality outcomes each day. When the following quality ethical traits are embraced consistently and by all employees, problems and conflicts can be diminished and quality and safety will be elevated.

**Confidentiality**—All personal patient and employee information must remain confidential. Instrument technicians can access information involving patients, procedures, co-workers and others. Personal information, including medical diagnoses or scheduled procedures, is part of the daily work in the SPD; however, it must not be shared among co-workers, relatives, friends or others. This includes discussions that may be overheard by other employees, patients and visitors.

**Integrity**—This is another trait necessary for SP technicians and their colleagues to succeed. Integrity means doing the right thing every time, even when nobody is watching or will know. The focus should always be on safety and best practices—never the fastest or easiest way.

**Honesty**—Those who are ethical always tell the truth, even under the most challenging circumstances. Lying is the fastest way to destroy credibility with others.

**Loyalty**—This character trait demonstrates trust and confidence. A loyal person takes ownership of and



responsibility for their actions, putting their employer, colleagues and patients first, even if a mistake was made that could lead to reprimand or other consequences.

*Compassion*—This essential trait creates bonds that allow individuals to connect at a higher level. It demonstrates empathy and understanding and helps put others' needs and circumstances ahead of one's own—without expecting favors in return.

*Trustworthiness*—This trait means an individual is reliable, dependable and honorable.

*Law abiding*—To be successful, every healthcare employee must commit to following all regulations, policies and procedures and standards of conduct.

### **Objective 3: Explore ethical issues in the Sterile Processing department**

The nature of the work performed in the SPD can become overwhelming and challenging. Issues such as faulty equipment and a high volume of work, when not balanced with adequate staffing, instrumentation or other vital resources, are common concerns for many instrument technicians. At times, it can feel like everything is working against the SPD and all who work within its walls. Collectively, these situations can create ethical concerns that, if not addressed promptly, can negatively affect the department and organization.

Some common ethical issues that may arise in the SPD are:

*Diminished focus on patient safety*—Patient safety must always remain the top priority and never be compromised.

Every task SP technicians perform has a potential patient safety risk attached and must be completed correctly, consistently and safely in accordance with standards, guidelines, regulations, instructions for use (IFU) and policies and procedures. The decontamination and sterilization areas can present many patient safety risks, often in the way of taking dangerous shortcuts to save time and stay on schedule. All devices must be properly cleaned, inspected, assembled and sterilized according to the IFU, regardless of the time and resource constraints present. If an employee witnesses a peer knowingly or accidentally skipping steps or rushing a process, they should be alerted and corrected, or the manager should be notified.

*Misunderstanding work expectations*—Wherever a diverse group of people work together, there is a potential for misunderstanding or misinterpreting roles, expectations and processes. It is crucial that all employees understand the department and facility's expectations for quality standards and work performance and not blindly adhere to other's assumptions. When in doubt, employees should ask their SP leader.

*Demonstrating entitlement*—Some employees believe they are entitled to things that are not ethical. For example, they may casually extend their breaks because they feel they worked exceptionally hard, take a sick day when they are not ill, sneak a snack or beverage into work areas, rely on workstation computers for personal use, or take supplies, such as pens or paper, for use at home. Each of these examples is unethical. They can

drain the healthcare facility's valuable resources, jeopardize an employee's job, and negatively affect employee and patient safety.

*Providing false or incorrect documentation*—Some employees may be tempted to falsify records because they failed to follow standard operating procedures, for example, or provide incomplete details that can affect quality and safety. Complete, accurate and thorough documentation (as required in the facility's policies and procedures) is required at all times to verify all items were processed correctly and consistently.

*Accepting favors from vendors*—SP professionals should not accept gifts from vendor representatives. All employees and vendor representatives must be familiar with the facility's corporate compliance policies and always comply with them. It is unethical for employees to accept gifts or other vendor offers because they could be interpreted as bribes.

*Not prioritizing employee safety*—Unethical behaviors or practices that place oneself or other employees' safety at risk must never be allowed and should always be reported to management. Some examples include inappropriate handling of sharps, deliberate misuse of personal protective equipment, using equipment determined to be faulty and not complying with regulations, standards, IFU, and policies and procedures. Any deliberate flouting of safe procedures and best practices is unethical and should never be acceptable in any area of the SPD.



### Conclusion

In the SPD, ethics guide quality-focused technicians to provide optimal service and support and promote a safe work environment for their colleagues. Patients trust that the healthcare facility's employees will provide safe practices that contribute to their positive outcomes, and every employee bears personal responsibility for fulfilling that goal.

When ethical practices—such as maintaining confidentiality and demonstrating integrity, honesty, loyalty, compassion, trustworthiness and respect—are prioritized and embraced, the organization's mission of providing service excellence and positive outcomes will be achieved. Every employee must

recognize that how their department is viewed is a direct reflection of those who work there. **P**

### RESOURCES

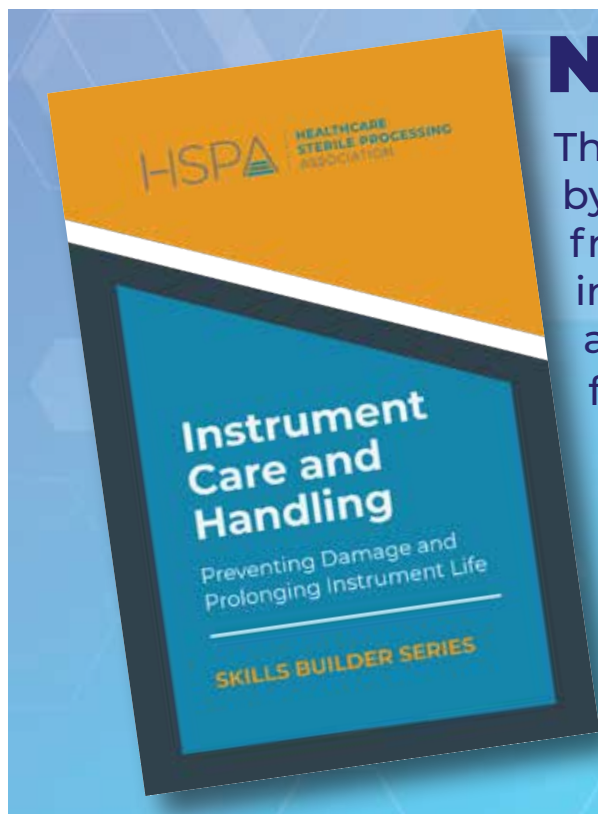
Healthcare Sterile Processing Association (HSPA). *Sterile Processing Leadership Manual, Fourth Ed.*, Chapter 1.

HSPA. *Sterile Processing Technical Manual, Ninth Ed.*, Chapter 1. P. 11.

Caudell, Pamela H. *Ethical Issues in the SP Arena*. 2006.

American Medical Association. *Code of Medical Ethics*. <https://www.ama-assn.org/topics/ama-code-medical-ethics>

Philadelphia Technician Training Institute. "What does professional accountability mean for Sterile Processing Technicians?"



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## Ethics and the Instrument Technician: Their Role in Quality and Safety

Lesson No. CIS 307 (Instrument Continuing Education – ICE) · Lesson expires February 2027

1. Ethics are behaviors that direct individuals:
  - a. To make the right decisions
  - b. To assume positions of authority
  - c. To expect better job perks
  - d. To seek certification or secondary degrees
2. Ethical behavior in Sterile Processing helps improve relationships and always prevents unfavorable situations with co-workers and customers.
  - a. True
  - b. False
3. Specific expectations for the work performed by any professional is a:
  - a. Moral obligation
  - b. Moral duty
  - c. Moral judgment
  - d. Code of ethics
4. Ethical behavior at work can be affected by one's:
  - a. Personal beliefs
  - b. Religious practices
  - c. Commitment to work
  - d. All the above
5. Facility policies, procedures and standards of conduct are developed to:
  - a. Create ethical conflicts
  - b. Guide employees to make ethical decisions
  - c. Change employees' personal beliefs
  - d. Prevent all instances of unethical behavior
6. Fairness ensures decisions are free from:
  - a. Judgment
  - b. Bias
  - c. Discrimination
  - d. All the above
7. Respectful behavior:
  - a. Often causes problems when personal beliefs are involved
  - b. Is the foundation for conflict resolution
  - c. May be considered a personal belief
  - d. Is not important as long as quality work is performed
8. The American Medical Association developed Principles of Ethics that:
  - a. Were designed around ethical patient care
  - b. Are regulatory requirements
  - c. Must be included in Human Resources hiring procedures
  - d. Should be posted prominently in all healthcare departments
9. Taking supplies from the department for use at one's home is an example of:
  - a. Demonstrating entitlement
  - b. Misunderstanding work expectations
  - c. Rightful ownership
  - d. Taking favors for hard work
10. Following the manufacturer's instructions for use when processing instruments is an example of which basic rule of the American Medical Association's Principle of Ethics?
  - a. No intentional or needless harm or injury should be created for a patient
  - b. A physician should develop a care plan
  - c. A patient must indicate a willingness to accept a proposed treatment
  - d. All employees must understand and demonstrate compliance with regulations
11. Not taking shortcuts when working alone in the decontamination area is an example of:
  - a. Confidentiality
  - b. Integrity
  - c. Honesty
  - d. Compassion
12. Integrity means:
  - a. Following the manager's orders, even when a process is questionable
  - b. Doing the right thing when someone is watching
  - c. Following the steps performed by a trusted peer
  - d. Doing the right thing even when nobody is watching
13. Patient safety is at the forefront of ethical behavior in all tasks performed by Sterile Processing. It can be compromised by:
  - a. Not posting instructions for use near the door of the decontamination area
  - b. Brushing cannulated instruments
  - c. Inappropriate use of personal protective equipment
  - d. Having non-certified technicians responsible for critical tasks
14. Lying:
  - a. Is unavoidable in most workplaces
  - b. Must always result in employee termination
  - c. Is often an effective way to avoid conflict
  - d. Is the fastest way to destroy credibility with others.
15. Which is an example of ethical behavior in the Sterile Processing department?
  - a. Documenting thoroughly and accurately
  - b. Not accepting gifts from vendors
  - c. Not using the department's computers for personal use
  - d. All the above

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