

BIOETHICS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN DENTISTRY

Bioética y Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible en Odontología

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This letter's objective is to reflect on the discipline of dentistry from a bioethical perspective within the structural framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) concerning decision-making at the public policy level, which impacts the population. From a bioethical perspective, the principles of autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, and justice are as relevant in the clinical field —such as the informed consent process, data privacy and confidentiality, and the application of new health technologies— as they are in actions that can collectively impact the population, focusing on individuals and well-being at local, regional, national, and even at global levels. Ethical consideration must also extend to omissions in the process of drafting, developing, and implementing public policies that have the potential to reduce inequalities in timely healthcare access or disproportionately affect populations, particularly those in vulnerable situations.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were established as a global priority to address worldwide challenges that foster or perpetuate inequalities or hinder national development, without sacrificing the relationship with the environment and the societies that comprise it. The United Nations defines them as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.¹

The principles of bioethics and the SDGs are not mutually exclusive, but are interconnected.² Both promote the idea of responsible and equitable healthcare and well-being for all people. Bioethics plays a crucial role in addressing these disparities and ensuring equitable access to healthcare through social justice, while the SDGs provide a framework for sustainable development across various sectors, including health. For instance, access to healthcare, particularly for vulnerable populations such as the elderly, low-income individuals, and those in remote rural areas, is both a bioethical issue and an SDG goal.³

Dentistry, as a health discipline, plays a crucial role in achieving the SDGs, even though it is not explicitly mentioned within the targets, particularly in SDG 3.

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SDGs, Bioethics, and Dentistry

Oral health is connected to several SDG levels or targets, beyond health and well-being (SDG 3). The World Health Organization (WHO), in its Report 148, highlights other areas such as decent work and economic growth (SDG 8) and environmental care (SDG 13), among others.⁴

Recently, the FDI World Dental Federation, following the 74th Declaration of 2021 and the 75th Declaration of 2022, proposed a working framework recognizing the need to align sector strategies with the SDGs outlined in the United Nations' 2030 Agenda. Activities associated with the dental profession have been identified as strongly related to eight SDG goals, presenting a real opportunity for positive action toward sustainability: Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-being), Goal 4 (Quality Education), Goal 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), Goal 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), Goal 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), Goal 13 (Climate Action), and Goal 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). The ability to engage with these UN SDGs relies on a comprehensive understanding of the awareness levels of these issues, the challenges to change, the drivers of engagement, and opportunities for effective action, all based on available evidence.

In Chile, the Ministry of Health presented the Health Objectives for the Decade 2021-2030 aligned with SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), which recognizes climate change as a health issue. These objectives adopt guiding principles such as ensuring health rights, achieving universal coverage, and reducing health inequities.⁵ They involve integrating themes like equity, life-course perspectives, comprehensive health models, and intersectorality into seven strategic axes. This approach identifies and addresses health outcome disparities among individuals and

groups while fostering collaborative public-private partnerships for national agreements on integrated development, working toward a new person-centered healthcare model within a sustainable health system.⁶

Ensuring individuals are treated with respect and dignity while protecting their rights is essential, and professional practice must align with these principles.⁷ Ethical decisions in dentistry must adhere to the principles of autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and particularly social justice, given the health inequities that can impact not only individuals over their lifespans but entire communities. One significant issue is timely access to care, prioritizing efforts for vulnerable populations without excluding others, through a preventive and care-oriented approach.⁸

Stakeholders and Ethical Implications

Healthcare stakeholders, particularly in oral health, include individuals or groups interested in timely care, disease prevention and control, and oral health promotion. These stakeholders encompass patients, professionals, academics, managers, researchers, legislators, private sector representatives, and, most importantly, decision-makers creating interventions to address territorial inequalities⁹ and ensure financial security, enabling equitable access to essential healthcare services for all. Each stakeholder may have varying perspectives on ethical issues related to oral healthcare, which must be considered when addressing gaps in affordability and ideal treatments.

Authorities must ensure the population's oral health is safeguarded, providing equitable care and respecting rights and autonomy.¹⁰ Dental professionals, patients, and decision-makers must consider the bioethical implications of health interventions to ensure their appropriate

and responsible use.¹¹ This aligns with SDG 3's goal of ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages.¹²

Addressing ethical concerns in interventions aimed at sustainable development and their population impacts is crucial. Training future oral health professionals as researchers, leaders, educators, and collaborators capable of proposing solutions to global issues is essential. Dental care must be delivered fairly and equitably,

addressing the needs of vulnerable communities while following a life-course approach that fosters full individual development. Additionally, efforts should mini-mize environmental impact, whether through clinical procedures or policy directives from health authorities.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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