

Ethical Guidance for Medical Students in Iraqi Kurdistan

Preface

This ethical guidance document has been developed to support medical students across the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in understanding and upholding the professional values expected of future doctors. It reflects a commitment to nurturing ethical, competent, and compassionate physicians who serve the needs of their communities with integrity and accountability.

Medical students are entrusted with responsibilities that extend beyond academic achievement. From the outset of their training, they are expected to demonstrate professionalism in their behaviour, decision-making, and interactions with patients, colleagues, and society at large. This document outlines the key ethical principles that underpin those expectations, structured around clearly defined areas and actionable pillars.

The guidance integrates internationally recognised standards of medical professionalism with the cultural, religious, and social context of the Kurdistan Region. It is intended to serve as both a reference and a reflective tool throughout a student's journey in medical education and clinical training.

This document is intended for use by all medical students and educators across medical schools in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and it should be read, understood, and applied consistently throughout the course of medical training.

About This Guidance

This guidance serves as a practical and structured reference for medical students in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. It sets out specific expectations for student conduct across academic, clinical, and social environments, helping students navigate their responsibilities with clarity and purpose.

The framework is organised into five Areas, each encompassing a set of Ethical Pillars, concise principles that translate core ethical values into practical behaviours. These Pillars are designed to support ongoing reflection, decision-making, and discussion throughout medical training.

The guidance is intended for regular use in academic discussions, professionalism teaching, clinical placement preparation, and self-assessment. It complements formal learning and assessment by encouraging students to engage with ethical practice as an integral part of becoming a safe, competent, and compassionate doctor.

Structure of This Guidance

This guidance is organised into five thematic Areas, each addressing a major aspect of ethical and professional conduct expected of medical students. Within each Area are several Ethical Pillars: clear, actionable principles that describe specific attitudes and behaviours students should develop during their training.

This structure is designed to support learning, reflection, and application across a range of settings, including academic study, clinical placements, and public or online interactions.

By presenting the guidance in this format, students and educators can easily reference, discuss, and integrate key expectations into day-to-day practice and professional development.

Ethical Areas and Pillars (Areas 1-5)

Area 1: Learning, Competence, and Professional Growth

This area highlights the importance of active learning, academic honesty, and working within one's competence. It encourages students to take responsibility for their progress, stay informed about medical developments, and engage in continuous personal and professional growth.

Ethical Pillar 1.1: Active Engagement and Lifelong Learning

- Participate fully in all educational activities, including classroom sessions, clinical placements, and assessments.
- Take initiative in managing your own learning and seek opportunities to broaden your understanding.
- Stay up to date with current developments in scientific research and clinical practice.
- Use reflection regularly to identify strengths, address areas for improvement, and monitor your development.

Ethical Pillar 1.2: Academic Integrity and Openness to Feedback

- Maintain high standards of academic honesty. Avoid plagiarism, falsification of data, or any other form of academic misconduct.
- Welcome constructive feedback from faculty, supervisors, peers, and patients.
- Reflect critically on feedback and performance and take appropriate steps to improve.

Ethical Pillar 1.3: Practising Safely Within Your Level of Training

- Recognise and respect the limits of your current clinical knowledge and skills.
- Do not undertake procedures or offer clinical advice unless you are properly trained and supervised.
- Always identify yourself as a medical student and clearly communicate your role to patients and healthcare teams.

Area 2: Compassionate Communication and Respectful Patient Engagement

This area focuses on promoting respectful, compassionate engagement with patients, families, and carers. It emphasises the importance of clear and culturally appropriate communication, protecting patient confidentiality, and seeking informed consent. These Ethical Pillars support the development of trust, dignity, and safe, patient-centred care under appropriate supervision.

Ethical Pillar 2.1: Respecting Patient Dignity, Privacy, and Beliefs

- Treat all patients with compassion, sensitivity, and respect, regardless of background, ethnicity, gender, age, ability, or religious belief.
- Acknowledge and accommodate the cultural and religious values of individuals and communities in the Kurdistan Region.
- Ensure patient dignity, comfort, and privacy are maintained, particularly during examinations or personal care.

Ethical Pillar 2.2: Seeking Informed Consent and Clarifying Your Role

- Never assume consent, clearly explain your role and ask for permission before examining or interacting with a patient.
- Always identify yourself as a medical student and explain your level of training honestly.
- Do not obtain written consent or perform clinical procedures without appropriate supervision, as these are the responsibilities of licensed professionals.

Ethical Pillar 2.3: Communicating Clearly and Compassionately

- Use clear, respectful, and culturally appropriate language when speaking with patients and families.
- Use plain language and avoid medical jargon to ensure understanding.

- Adapt your explanations to meet each patient's needs and level of understanding.
- Listen attentively to patient concerns and respond with empathy.

Ethical Pillar 2.4: Maintaining Confidentiality and Trust

- Do not discuss patient information in public places, on social media, or with anyone not directly involved in their care.
- Safeguard all patient records, whether written or digital—and ensure secure handling and appropriate disposal.
- Anonymise patient information when using it for assignments, presentations, or learning activities.
- Understand that confidentiality is a professional obligation essential to building and maintaining trust.

Area 3: Teamwork, Respect, and Professional Conduct

This area highlights the importance of respectful collaboration, professionalism, and accountability within academic and clinical teams. It emphasises that professionalism includes not only individual conduct, but also how students contribute to a respectful and safe team environment. These Ethical Pillars guide students to work cooperatively, embrace diversity, and respond appropriately when encountering unprofessional or unsafe behaviour.

Ethical Pillar 3.1: Respecting Colleagues and Fostering Collegiality

- Treat peers, faculty, clinical staff, and all members of the healthcare team with courtesy, empathy, and professionalism.
- Contribute to a positive learning and working environment by being cooperative, respectful, and inclusive.
- Avoid gossip, dismissive behaviour, or actions that may undermine trust, morale, or team cohesion.

Ethical Pillar 3.2: Embracing Diversity and Promoting Inclusion

- Respect the cultural, ethnic, religious, and personal diversity of patients, peers, and colleagues across the Kurdistan Region.
- Do not engage in or tolerate any form of discrimination, harassment, or bullying.
- Help create a learning and clinical environment where all individuals feel valued, included, and safe.

Ethical Pillar 3.3: Teamwork and Professional Behaviour on Placement

- Participate actively in clinical teams, recognising the contributions of all healthcare professionals.
- Follow instructions from supervisors with professionalism and reliability.
- Arrive prepared, be punctual, and uphold institutional protocols, including dress code and behaviour standards.

Ethical Pillar 3.4: Raising Concerns and Protecting Patients

- Report any unsafe, unethical, or discriminatory behaviour through appropriate institutional channels.
- Understand that raising concerns is a professional duty and essential to safeguarding patients and maintaining public trust.
- When in doubt, seek confidential guidance from a supervisor, academic advisor, or designated support officer.

Area 4: Integrity, Accountability, and Public Trust

This area focuses on the essential role of honesty, accountability, and professionalism in building and maintaining public trust. Medical students are expected to uphold ethical standards both within and beyond the clinical setting. These Ethical Pillars reinforce the importance of integrity, responsible behaviour, and maintaining appropriate boundaries as future representatives of the medical profession.

Ethical Pillar 4.1: Acting with Honesty and Transparency

- Be honest in all academic, clinical, and personal matters, including documentation, communication, and assessments.
- If you make a mistake or witness an incident that may affect patient safety or institutional integrity, disclose it promptly and seek guidance.
- Demonstrate openness to learning from errors and maintain a commitment to ethical improvement.

Ethical Pillar 4.2: Upholding Professional Behaviour Inside and Outside Medical School

- Recognise that your behaviour outside academic and clinical settings, including online conduct, reflects on the medical profession.
- Avoid any actions that could damage your professional reputation or that of your institution, including dishonesty, substance misuse, or inappropriate public behaviour.

- Present yourself with professionalism in appearance, language, and interactions, upholding the values of your community and profession.

Ethical Pillar 4.3: Maintaining Appropriate Professional Boundaries

- Maintain respectful, professional relationships with patients, peers, and staff at all times.
- Do not engage in personal, romantic, or financial relationships with patients or individuals in vulnerable positions.
- Respect local cultural and religious norms, particularly in gender-sensitive situations, and offer a chaperone when appropriate.

Area 5: Wellbeing, Health Responsibility, and Fitness to Study

This area focuses on the importance of maintaining physical and mental health to ensure safe and effective learning and clinical engagement. Medical students have a responsibility to monitor their wellbeing, seek support when needed, and take action when health concerns could affect their fitness to study or participate in clinical placements. These Ethical Pillars support the development of resilient, responsible doctors who recognise the importance of self-care in safeguarding patients and the profession.

Ethical Pillar 5.1: Caring for Your Own Health and Wellbeing

- Take personal responsibility for maintaining your physical and mental health through healthy habits and appropriate medical care.
- Register with a general practitioner and comply with immunisation, screening, or occupational health requirements.
- Avoid self-diagnosing or self-treating yourself, friends, or family members.

Ethical Pillar 5.2: Protecting Patients and Colleagues

- Do not attend placements or academic activities if you are unwell, especially if symptoms could pose a risk to others.
- Inform your institution promptly if a health condition may impact your performance, attendance, or ability to engage safely.
- Collaborate with student support services or faculty to arrange reasonable adjustments where necessary.

Ethical Pillar 5.3: Recognising and Responding to Concerns About Fitness to Study

- Reflect honestly on your ability to meet the demands of medical training and seek help early if you are struggling.
- If concerned about a peer's wellbeing or behaviour, report it respectfully through appropriate channels.
- Understand that acknowledging and acting on health concerns is a professional responsibility, not a weakness.

Concluding Remarks

Professionalism is not a fixed destination; it is a lifelong process of ethical growth, self-awareness, and reflection. As a future doctor in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, your responsibilities extend beyond clinical knowledge to encompass compassion, integrity, and accountability in all aspects of your personal and professional life.

By embracing the principles outlined in this guidance, you help foster a healthcare environment that is safe, respectful, and ethically grounded. These values will shape your identity as a medical student and continue to guide your behaviour, decisions, and relationships throughout your career in medicine.

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