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**Adherence To Professional Ethics Among Medical**  
**Laboratory Personnel:**

**A Prerequisite For Quality Health Care Delivery In Nigeria**

## Adherence To Professional Ethics Among Medical Laboratory Personnel: A Prerequisite For Quality Health Care Delivery In Nigeria

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### Introduction

Medical laboratory science has been defined by the Medical Laboratory Science Council of Nigeria (MLSCN) Act 11 of 2003 as the practice involving the analysis of human or animal tissues, body fluids, excretions, production of biologicals, design and fabrication of equipment for the purpose of medical laboratory diagnosis, treatment and research<sup>1</sup>. Quality practices in medical laboratory service are of paramount importance in health care delivery.

Healthcare ethics is not routinely taught to the health professionals, and there are reports that even the word "ethics" has been completely ignored in the undergraduate curriculum of some health professionals. Hence it is not surprising that the theory and application of healthcare ethics in day-to-day practice is still not well known to many healthcare providers; medical laboratory professionals inclusive. Therefore, practice of ethics in healthcare may be very much influenced by the cultural background and beliefs of the people in every region.

Ethical behavior means doing the "right" thing. Frequently, the ethical approach is not the most cost-effective way to solve a problem however nor does the ethical solution always result in greater short-term profits. However, the moral structure and legal framework encourage us to walk the ethical high road. Failure to do so can lead to public humiliation and legally enforced penalties.

### "DO'S AND "DON'T"S IN MEDICAL LABORATORY PRACTICE

There are 'do's and 'don't's which constitute ethical values in this environment and in compliance with provisions of rules of the regulatory body-Medical Laboratory Science Council of Nigeria. The list is inexhaustible but some of the specific guidelines are listed below.

1. Adhere to Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for all analysis in the laboratory even if it means a longer turn around time and costs more resources.
2. Do not discriminate in observing safety precautions at the point of contact with patients for example during phlebotomy and in handling samples. Observe universal precautions by wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) and designating dirty and neat regions in the laboratory for the safety of laboratory staff, the patients and the environment.
- 3 Guard the privacy of the clients as provided for by the Laboratory guidelines. Do not compromise patient confidentiality. Therefore, resist all temptations to divulge laboratory results to unauthorized individuals.
- 4 Ensure that internal proficiency testing is conducted at intervals, depending on work load and enroll for an External Quality Assurance (EQA) Program.
5. Practice waste disintegration and dispose of all

biohazard wastes generated in your laboratory as provided for by the law.

6. Engage trained, certificated and licensed individuals in your laboratory and do not promote quackery. Subject these employees to retraining at intervals by enrolling them for continuous professional development (CPD) of MLSCN to enable them perform their tasks well.

7. Discuss all potential conflicts of interest with your supervisors so that you can be exempted from the procedures in which your interest may be a source of bias. For example, it is not ethical for you to handle parental dispute case in which a putative father is a relative or friend to you. You must not conceal your relationship with the client from your supervisor. This is to avoid the slightest hint of prejudice.

8. Do not pay kickbacks or any other improper incentives to clients and clinicians, with a view to induce them to request laboratory tests on patients who do not need them.

9. Do not lie about laboratory services of which you lack facility. Do not falsify any result for any reason whatsoever. Remember, there is no placebo in the laboratory.

10. Do not perform yet to be validated assays in medical laboratory for diagnostic purposes. Remember that medical laboratory techniques are standardized experiments that have been assessed for analytical reproducibility and analytical accuracy, and found suitable.

11. When the need arises, be comfortable to place a call back on an erroneous result that has left the laboratory. You will be doing the patient harm, if you do not call the result back.

12. Do not compromise quality for financial gain. Treat each specimen as if it were your own. Do not use an inferior method just because it saves you money. Do not hire technical support staff for the

lowest salary if they are not qualified to fulfill the job requirements. 13. Regularly audit your ethics/compliance program

14. Do not violate relevant law under any circumstances.

15. Perform only those tests requested.

16. Do not discriminate on any basis. Never discriminate on the basis of age, sex, gender, ethnic background, race, or any other factor unrelated to job performance. This applies to hiring, disciplining, promoting, or dismissing employees.

17. Do not punish employees who criticize. Be open to criticism from employees. In no case should you punish the worker who speaks his piece, especially if it disagrees with management policies or procedures. Of course, the employee in question should present such criticism in the appropriate manner and forum.

18. Discipline employees who violate the laboratory's ethical guidelines. Don't accept unethical behavior from any employee. Send the clear message that your organization will not tolerate such action. If necessary, discipline and even dismiss those individuals who act in an unethical manner. The rest of the staff will get the message.

#### ETHICAL ISSUES IN GOVERNMENT AND PRIVATELY OWNED LABORATORIES

It is disturbing to observe that many unethical practices go unpunished in public health institutions. Many laboratories owned by the Government at Local, State and Federal levels perform within the limits of human and material resources provided; which may not be adequate. Even though the equipments, reagents and other facilities required for satisfactory functioning of laboratories are known to and are legislated on; and prescribed by government as prerequisites for running satisfactory laboratory services; these prerequisites are often lacking in

government owned hospital laboratories. Yet, patients who allegedly suffer from perceived laboratory malpractices and their relatives hardly ever seek redress and compensation from the law court or Medical Laboratory Science Council of Nigeria, as appropriate. This is because many Nigerians are not aware of their rights and furthermore, many of them believe that it is difficult for them to win a case in which the government institution itself is liable in an alleged case of negligence or unethical practice.

There may be medical laboratories which operate without licensed laboratorians, while some even compromise standards by using inappropriate technology. Some employees in public institutions also attend to clients samples brought to the laboratory as if they are doing the system a favour. All these are unethical and should not be allowed.

Private laboratories in Nigeria appear to be more stringently regulated by MLSCN nowadays; and the dividends include prompt and quality results occasioned by compliance with ethics<sup>2</sup>. The MLSCN inspects the privately owned laboratories at intervals across Nigeria using standardized check list which include assessment of the laboratory environment, equipments, reagents, personnel, operations and documentation practice; among others. Those laboratories found wanting by the criteria are closed down and sanctioned, while those that need little upgrading are counseled to do same and later monitored to ensure compliance. Public laboratories should be brought under similar strict regulation and control, in the interest of the Nigerian people who access services in these facilities.

Adherence to ethics and professional codes among laboratorians will help in building and maintaining standard health care system in Nigeria.

It will attract attention and respects to the laboratory which has remained the oracle of medicine.

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