EPiHC: Healthcare Principles in Practice

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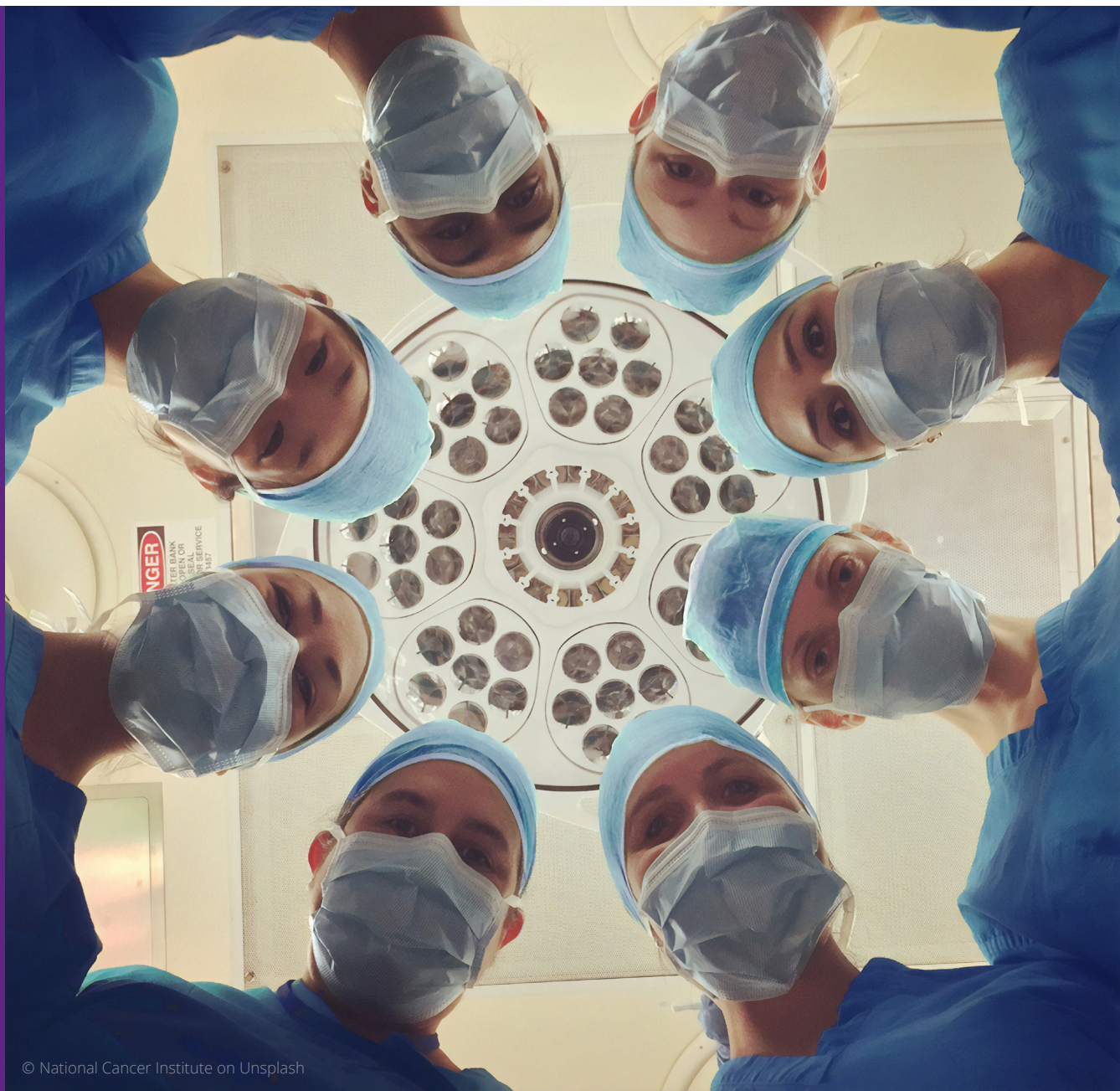
Codification and Standards Are What Companies Need to Change an Ideal Into Day-to-Day Practice

Just about every country has regulations overseeing the quality and cost of healthcare. And yet there are problems everywhere. To accomplish real change, with behavior that makes a real difference to the well-being of patients and employees, compliance does not suffice. Commitment is essential. It must be embedded in the thinking and practice of healthcare institutions throughout the world.

That is the goal of the Ethical Principles in Health Care (EPiHC), a World Bank and International Finance Corporation initiative launched in 2019. Just two years later, it has gained the support of nearly 200 signatory healthcare organizations in more than 45 countries. The signatories include hospitals, small clinics, networks of care, insurance and payor companies, associations, and healthcare investors. The 10 EPiHC Principles are universal and voluntary principles that, when followed, can bring consistent improvements in quality, safety, patients' rights, responsible use of data, treatment of staff, and social contribution.

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> **—Irina A. Nikolic,** Senior Specialist, World Bank

"We were looking for a system of values that we can all share and agree upon in the global health system," says Irina A. Nikolic, a senior specialist at the World Bank who helped to draft the principles. "Healthcare is diversely regulated around the world, with many different stakeholders. And not everybody behaves in the best way. Our hope was to find principles that can be used by all healthcare providers: from large, well-known institutions to one-person outposts with very limited resources."

The principles fill a need that has been recognized at least since 1999. That year, Donald Berwick, Howard Hiatt, and Richard Smith, noted physicians and advocates of healthcare quality, published an influential paper, "Shared Ethical Principles for Everybody in Health Care," in a leading British medical journal, arguing that trust in the field

was critical, and was likely to erode into contentiousness without a shared code of ethics.

Since then, the idea of strengthening the ethical dimensions of healthcare practice has steadily gained broader support. Hospitals and other institutions in the field are increasingly accountable for patient outcomes and their experiences. Stakeholders are more aware of problems such as inconsistency in healthcare costs, the use and misuse of patient information, and the differences in quality of care offered to different groups of patients. Healthcare organizational leaders are trying to close the gaps between their own habitual ways of working, their local regulatory requirements, and global best practices.

The COVID-19 pandemic raised awareness further. "There is now some very good work

going on to help a wider range of healthcare workers deal with the stresses in their lives," says Berwick. "Hospitals, pharmaceutical companies, and others stepped up, at least temporarily, to cope with the enormous demand. And it illuminated the inequities of the current healthcare system around the world."

As EPiHC signatories become industry leaders in advocating for ethics, three aspects of the principles are particularly important: global consistency, innovation, and equity. Consistent principles allow companies to stand up for ethical practices, even when local laws and regulations vary, or the local culture has blind spots. In some places, principles such as Principle #7, "Safeguarding information and using data responsibly," may involve practices for patient privacy that local health organizations have never been exposed to before.

With the accelerating pace of pharmaceutical and technological innovation, there is a greater need for safeguards against misuse or malpractice. Some innovations can be used for harm; some require ethical guidelines to be used at their best; and some can involve pricing or selective prescription patterns that take advantage of vulnerable populations. Principles such as Principle #4, "Conducting business matters responsibly," and Principle #6, "Upholding

patients' rights," which covers informed consent, can help private sector healthcare institutions learn the practices and habits for using advanced technology wisely.

The third factor is equity: universal access to quality healthcare. This is particularly important in this age of pandemic and climate change, which have put new pressures and demands on healthcare systems and on patients' needs. Principles such as Principle #2, "Making a positive contribution to society," and Principle #8, "Preventing discrimination, harassment, and bullying," put the issue of equity at the center of activities.

Adopting the principles is just the starting point for many signatories. It sets them on a path toward accelerated learning and capability. Leaders in these organizations have told us that they expect their participation will increase their influence on public health issues, their ability to attract high-quality staff, and their returns on innovation, in both financial and reputational terms. Some are conducting regular staff meetings or trainings around the principles, or putting committees in place to implement the related practices. Some are using the principles as a way of assessing their own operations and reputation, or establishing new forms of oversight.

The principles follow a tradition of ethical medicine that goes back to the Hippocratic Oath. This credo, originally from ancient Greece, has been used by physicians throughout the centuries to hold themselves to high standards. Every month we highlight a new EPiHC signatory, explaining their reasons for joining this valuable community and their aspirations for the future of healthcare. While their experiences are varied, the signatories share a deep level of commitment, not just to the principles themselves, but also to the professional capabilities, workplace culture, and way of thinking that they represent.

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Abdali Hospital and Medical Center
Jordan

Signatory since 2020

Abdali Hospital and Medical Center is a large, multispecialty hospital whose mission is to provide best-practice, patient-centered care and promote research and education. The hospital opened in 2019 and became an EPiHC founding signatory early the following year, underscoring its commitment to incorporating ethical practices into its delivery of health services. Dr. Eduard Lotz, the hospital's chief operating officer and chief clinical officer, and Ahmad Abu Ghazaleh, a cofounder and the hospital's executive deputy chairman, explain why the principles matter so much, what it takes to monitor progress, and how the principles guide the way they work.

BECOMING A SIGNATORY

AHMAD ABU GHAZALEH
Cofounder and
Executive Deputy Chairman

DR. EDUARD LOTZ
Chief Operating Officer and
Chief Clinical Officer

ABU GHAZALEH:

We learned about the principles very early, through the World Bank and IFC. They saw how enthusiastic we were; it was a natural marriage. We were already following the team approach, in which specialists work together and there is continuity of care. This was a new approach for Jordan.

Our goal with the principles is to create a sustainable healthcare business. Our business depends on it. People come to us in a vulnerable state, under immense stress. The principles are not just a document to sign; they represent a way of life that is part of our identity.

DR. LOTZ:

As a healthcare facility, we from time to time encounter potential ethical pitfalls. We believe in learning from one another's experience. In joining a group like this, we can benchmark our own practices against those of other healthcare organizations.

We have taken many of the principles to heart. For example, we provide some services, such as essential surgery, at cost to disadvantaged patients in partnership with our physicians.

We take care to respect the environment. Therefore our buildings are completely solar-powered, including their heating and cooling systems. Because our solar plant generates more energy than required, we contribute excess energy to the Jordan grid.

THE PRINCIPLES

#4 Conducting Business Matters Responsibly

DR. LOTZ:

In the Middle East, gifting is a generally accepted aspect of business culture and expression of gratitude. In order to ensure the boundaries of gifting is respected by staff, we have established a policy where employees are not allowed to accept gifts unless they are perishable. Cash donations from any source (e.g., patients) go to either a fund for disadvantaged patients or to the staff's social fund for educational purposes.

ABU GHAZALEH:

My father, Mohammad Abu Ghazaleh, is chairman of our hospital group. He also owns a food company that bid to be the hospital's catering vendor. We had to inform our chairman that his other company was not successful based on a competitive process. This was respected by all.

#6 Upholding Patient Rights

DR. LOTZ:

Right now, we are focusing on Principle #6—upholding patient rights. We're looking at the way we involve patients in decision-making about their care. This involves improving our approach to sharing information and informed consent.

ASSESSING AND EVALUATING PROGRESS

DR. LOTZ:

Evaluations of ethical performance involve several levels. For instance, Principle #3 involves promoting high-quality standards for patient care, including safety. So you ask first, as the first level, do we have policies and practices in place? Second level, we look at case studies—are the policies working? Third level, we measure the outcome of procedures, survey staff, suppliers, patients, and other stakeholders.

Continuous learning and improvement require continual measurement and sharing of knowledge and experience.

Asociación Colombiana de Empresas de Medicina Integral (ACEMI)
Colombia

Signatory since 2020

The Colombian Association of Health Insurance Companies (ACEMI) is a trade association that represents private health plans. Its member companies provide health services to 65 percent of the Colombian population. Over the years, ACEMI has also become a think tank on health policies and value-based care. Gustavo Morales Cobo, CEO of the Association since 2018, explains how EPiHC challenges companies, what it takes to incorporate the principles into action, and what they are doing to follow Principle #7 on data protection.

BECOMING A SIGNATORY

GUSTAVO MORALES COBO
Chief Executive Officer

MORALES:
We have always been strong believers in meeting international standards, especially when they are developed by well-renowned organizations such as IFC and the World Bank. We were very glad to learn about EPiHC in 2019, and we began incorporating the principles in our daily functions, even before we became a signatory.

Each of the 10 Principles is a world in itself, full of challenges, and of ideas on how to behave and how not to behave.

My dream would be that the EPiHC Principles—and in general, the idea of good corporate behavior and self-regulatory mechanisms—would be part of the DNA of our corporations. ACEMI represents the 10 largest health insurance companies in Colombia. I want to be able to say that they [are now] identified as the most committed to ethical practices. It's very positive that EPiHC allows trade associations to be signatories, because we can be multipliers, helping a range of companies follow the roadmap.

THE PRINCIPLES

#7 Safeguarding Information and Using Data Responsibly

MORALES:
We are developing new practices related to responsible use of data. In our national healthcare system, much of which is publicly funded but privately managed, we need to reconcile privacy and patient rights with efficiency. Every provider must access patient information. So, we're exploring the interoperability of health records and accessibility for doctors, while maintaining basic protections.

ASSESSING AND EVALUATING PROGRESS

MORALES:
When ACEMI adhered to the principles, we had agreed that each of them would be incorporated into our daily activities. We created an internal group specifically to work on this. It has a skilled professional in charge and is accountable to our board of directors. In every meeting of our board of directors, which is composed of the CEOs of our member health insurance companies, we allocate time for this. Our legal, communications, medical, and technological committees report on their progress.

We have also began working on metrics to track our progress. It is challenging because those metrics need to be compatible with other health systems around the world. In the end, each one of the principles will be the basis of a different plan of action.

Confederação Nacional de Saúde (CNSaúde)
Brazil

Signatory since 2021

The National Confederation of Health, Hospitals, Establishments and Services, which is known as CNSaúde, is a trade union of employers representing all health-service establishments in Brazil, including hospitals, clinics, nursing homes, healthcare-related laboratories, and related services. Bruno Sobral, the Confederation's executive director, and Esther Flesch, a Brazilian lawyer who has provided pro bono advice to the Confederation, explain why EPiHC immediately appealed to them, how the principles build trust, and what it takes to actually implement EPiHC.

BECOMING A SIGNATORY

BRUNO SOBRAL
Executive Director

ESTHER FLESCH
Lawyer

SOBRAL:

We joined EPiHC to connect with others and gain assistance for improving our practices. It is very helpful to have the World Bank and EPiHC along with us. Until 2018, CNSaúde was supported by a government-mandated tax on healthcare businesses. But in a financial reform measure, that tax was eliminated, and so was our budget. We had to attract funds directly from our member companies or we would not survive.

On behalf of our member companies, we became more involved in developing policies related to ethical issues, such as corruption and anti-trust. Pushing an ethical agenda for healthcare is key for us, to do our part to make sure that clients are paying for better-quality healthcare, not just for access.

FLESCH:

When Bruno and the rest of the CNSaúde leadership read the EPiHC materials, they immediately said, "That's exactly what we want." They saw written in clear, plain language exactly what they wanted to see implemented. We all live in a global world, and we need a global standard.

When I saw the EPiHC statement of purpose, I liked it quite a bit. It reminded me of the need to have purpose in life.

THE PRINCIPLES

#4 Conducting Business Matters Responsibly

SOBRAL:

Health ethics have been debated a lot in Brazil, especially when health plans raise their prices. Our member companies have been accused at times of not being honest about the cost of our inputs. So, we have to show society at large that we use resources in the most ethical way—to save lives.

We are still learning how the principles work, and the opportunity to work with the World Bank and IFC can help us increase the level of healthcare ethics in Brazil. One of the critical issues will be raising the level of goodwill between healthcare insurance and payor plans, and health care providers such as hospitals. These two groups have a history of not trusting each other, and that keeps us from finding the most ethical solutions. But we can only pursue this if healthcare payors and hospitals are together in the quest, with incentives that are aligned to support improvement.

#2 Making a Positive Contribution to Society

FLESCH:

When you think about compliance and doing the right thing, it cannot be only about the financial side or government relations. It has to be broader, including the human rights perspective, treating staff and patients the right way, and meeting socio-environmental concerns. All of these concerns are in people's minds right now.

And it's also in the principles. The organizations have to behave in the right way, not only in terms of having the right financials, the right relationship with healthcare professionals, and the right standards of quality, but also in how they treat people. This includes all of the people involved with the organization: the patients, the people that work there, the supply chain, everybody.

KIMSHEALTH
India and the Middle East

Signatory since 2020

Founded in Kerala, India, in 2003, KIMSHEALTH is a privately owned network of hospitals and healthcare facilities in India and five Gulf Cooperation Council countries—Bahrain, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. KIMSHEALTH has 2,000 beds, 600 physicians, a staff of more than 6,000 people, and 23 academic programs. The network has been a pioneer in making quality healthcare affordable and accessible. Dr. M.I. Sahadulla, group chairman and managing director of KIMSHEALTH, explains what attracted him to EPiHC and what steps the network is taking to implement to implement the principles.

BECOMING A SIGNATORY

DR. M.I. SAHADULLA

Chairman and
Managing Director

DR. SAHADULLA:
I have thought for years that the healthcare system needed an international organization devoted to ethical practices and standards. Thus, I was delighted to learn about EPiHC through the Association of Healthcare Providers of India (AHPI), of which I am one of the founders and directors. KIMSHEALTH immediately became a signatory.

From our beginnings, KIMSHEALTH has been based on the three pillars of quality, patient safety, and ethics. We also knew this was an area which needed improvement in India. We have an organizational structure, including an advisory board of independent directors, which helps us maintain our standards.

EPiHC is appearing just as awareness is growing of the importance of better healthcare practices.

Twenty years ago, the quality of healthcare was not measurable in India. Today there are credible key performance indicators and it has been shown that financial performance is improved, not diminished, by investments in quality.

Healthcare professionals are steadily moving toward greater self-control and self-awareness. I used to talk about ethics at healthcare conferences in India, and many people raised their eyebrows. They were skeptical. Today, people bring up ethical concerns themselves. Many problematic practices have been stopped, and if we and other similar organizations continue to be role models, then the field will continue to move forward.

THE PRINCIPLES

#2 Making a Positive Contribution to Society

DR. SAHADULLA:
India is a developing country with people at many economic levels. At KIMSHEALTH, we are always thinking about how to make healthcare more affordable. This is a difficult challenge for a private hospital. Unfortunately, about 60 percent of medical expenses in India are paid out of pocket by patients. We have therefore dedicated 2–3 percent of our revenues to subsidized care. We have subsidized heart surgeries for people below the poverty line, knee replacements for teachers with osteoarthritis, and many other kinds of routine care. We have a major corporate social responsibility activity of providing totally free prosthetic limbs for amputees. In recent years, India's corporate social responsibility laws have enabled us to expand these subsidies. During the pandemic, we have helped some villages in India with the tablets they need for online schooling and with free vaccinations.

#5 Respecting the Environment

DR. SAHADULLA:
Being environmentally friendly is very important. We use solar energy for electricity, energy conservation in our building design, and rain harvesting for our water supply. Risk management is crucial because of biomedical risks, including the risks inherent in waste segregation. We were fortunate to adopt these practices early on, because they have helped us develop our reputation and track record. Our new block has been awarded Green Platinum certification by [the] Indian Green Building Council (IGBC) and is the first platinum-rated hospital in Kerala under the IGBC Green New Building Rating System.

#6 Upholding Patients' Rights

DR. SAHADULLA:
On patients' rights, we began posting signs and setting up channels for patient complaints about 15 years ago. I think this has helped us develop a high level of trust. We also practice routinely "open disclosure," for example, when something goes wrong in the operating room or the ICU, we disclose [it] to the relatives and assure them that we have taken all the corrective measures.

#10 Supporting Ethical Practices and Preventing Harm

DR. SAHADULLA:
One example of ethical practices relates to organ transplants. There is often controversy over whether the brain death of the donor is properly monitored and certified. Regulations are not always followed. But today, India has established nodal agencies in most of the states for confirming brain death. Now brain death has to be confirmed by two Apnea tests done six hours apart by two physicians, (one from outside the facility) nominated by the Government, along with the treating physician and hospital administrator. We are working toward similar yardsticks in many fields of healthcare delivery.

Nyaho Medical Centre
Ghana

Signatory since 2021

Nyaho Medical Centre is Ghana's oldest group medical practice. It was founded in 1970, directly inspired by the Mayo Clinic's example of team-based health care. As a private hospital, Nyaho balances the twin goals of supporting public health and managing a viable business. Elikem Tamaklo, MD, is its managing director. Also see IFC's case study on Nyaho.

BECOMING A SIGNATORY

DR. ELIKEM TAMAKLO
Managing Director

DR. TAMAKLO:
Being a signatory to EPICH gives us the opportunity to be part of a dedicated group of global health care providers and investors in championing integrity and ethical practice in the health care community in Africa.

We continue to engage with all internal stakeholders, especially our employees, on the importance of applying the EPIHC Principles in our business. We are showcasing our signatory status through news releases and communications material to drive awareness of the EPIHC Principles. We also plan to take all opportunities to learn best practices from other members, as well as from key thought leaders.

Personally, I believe that through the collective effort of key stakeholders across the healthcare community, organisations will be better positioned to deliver consistent quality care to patients, especially in developing countries. It is a privilege to champion ethical practices in healthcare. The principles are completely aligned to Nyaho's mission of transforming the lives of patients by surpassing expectations and inspiring hope for a better Africa.

THE PRINCIPLES

#1 Respecting Laws and Regulations

DR. TAMAKLO:
This principle is very important to us. It affects our ability, as a leading private healthcare facility, to build and maintain trust with all key stakeholders, such as our Board of Directors, our employees, our patients, and the government.

#5 Making a Positive Contribution to Society

DR. TAMAKLO:
Making a positive contribution to society is another key aspect of our business. We have the Nyaho Dove Foundation, through which we conduct health programs that support the wider community. The Foundation works in four specific areas: We support improving access to health by conducting periodic medical outreach and social intervention programs; improving quality of care by supporting knowledge sharing and education through our annual healthcare forum; increasing the number of family physicians in Ghana through family physician training that we offer; and supporting new advances and treatments In healthcare by making research and development an important part of our work.

ASSESSING AND EVALUATING PROGRESS

DR. TAMAKLO:
All healthcare organisations need to ensure that their people understand how these ethical principles relate to day-to-day practices. We also need to develop agreed metrics around each principle that can be monitored and evaluated as part of the success factors for the organisation.

The Principles

EPiHC is a set of ten principles to guide the behavior of health care providers, payors, and investors. Adopted voluntarily, these principles can help to shape the values and behavior of health care providers and strengthen trust between providers and their stakeholders. Such trust is essential to effectively deliver the best possible care to the greatest number of patients.

1 RESPECTING LAWS AND REGULATIONS

The organization conducts its business legally and responsibly. It ensures that staff understand and respect the laws, regulations, policies, and standards that affect its business.

2 MAKING A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIETY

The organization considers its impact on society and the broader health system when planning and delivering services. This includes consideration of quality, efficiency, access, and affordability. It does not knowingly engage in activities that undermine the goals of the health system or the overall health and wellbeing of the population. It initiates and sustains strong and effective partnerships within the communities it serves and with other actors in the broader health system. This includes actively engaging with stakeholders on efforts to improve access to affordable care and to advance health for all.

3 PROMOTING HIGH QUALITY STANDARDS

The organization provides the highest possible quality of care, including for patient safety. This includes implementing formal processes for continuous quality improvement. The organization refers to evidence based internationally recognized practices to support patient care. It makes treatment and care decisions based on the best quality outcome for the patient.

4 CONDUCTING BUSINESS MATTERS RESPONSIBLY

The organization accurately and honestly represents and explains the services that it provides. It does not take unfair advantage of anyone through manipulation, concealment, abuse of privileged information, or misrepresentation of facts. It acts honestly and does not engage in any activity intended to defraud any individual or organization of money, property, or their time. It avoids conflicts

of interest. It enacts policies and practices to fight bribery and corruption. It deals sensitively and humanely with all patients, including those who do not have sufficient funds for treatment.

5 RESPECTING THE ENVIRONMENT

The organization works in ways that minimize negative impact on the environment, including making efforts to conserve energy and reduce waste. All waste, including biomedical waste, is collected, stored and disposed of in a safe and environmentally responsible manner.

6 UPHOLDING PATIENTS' RIGHTS

The organization provides care respectful of patients' personal values and beliefs. It respects patients' rights to dignity, privacy and confidentiality. It supports patients' rights during the care process, including informed consent and the right to refuse treatment. It implements mechanisms to oversee research activities. Any person enrolled in clinical research is fully informed of the risks and benefits, and their right to refuse to participate or drop out without risk of reprisal. All are informed about their rights and responsibilities in a manner and language they can understand.

7 SAFEGUARDING INFORMATION AND USING DATA RESPONSIBLY

The organization maintains appropriate administrative, technical, and physical safeguards to ensure that information is kept secure, accurate, complete, untampered with, and unavailable to persons not authorized to have access. It follows appropriate data standards, including consideration of new and evolving technologies. It maintains confidentiality subject to the highest standards, including: data minimization and retention; use for research only when disclosed, on a minimum data necessary basis, and subject to appropriate patient rights and legal standards; and transfer or disclosure as necessary for certain public health and claims processing purposes. Patients have the right to obtain, review and correct their health records information.

8 PREVENTING DISCRIMINATION, HARASSMENT, AND BULLYING

The organization promotes a positive and respectful environment for everyone, including patients, visitors, employees, volunteers, physicians, students and contract workers. The organization does not tolerate any form of discrimination, bullying or harassment.

9 PROTECTING AND EMPOWERING STAFF

The organization promotes a safe working environment. It makes sure that all staff have the training and tools they need to do their jobs safely, to meet patients' and customers' needs, and to meet the standards of applicable professional associations.

10 SUPPORTING ETHICAL PRACTICES AND PREVENTING HARM

The organization develops formal policies and procedures for areas with ethical concerns, considering accepted international norms in doing so. Staff are trained in these concerns and how to address them. In addition to activities proscribed by local laws and regulations, the organization does not participate in or condone harmful practices.

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Questions?

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