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Ethical Dimensions of Surgical Practice in *Sushruta Samhita*

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ABSTRACT

Ethics constitutes the backbone of surgical practice, guiding the moral integrity, professional responsibility, and clinical conduct of a surgeon. The *Sushruta Samhita*, a foundational text of *Shalya Tantra*, presents a well-organized ethical framework that seamlessly integrates moral discipline with surgical expertise. It emphasizes that technical skill devoid of ethical grounding can be harmful and unacceptable in clinical practice.

The treatise discusses ethical principles related to personal discipline, professional competence, academic rigor, patient welfare, operative responsibility, training methods, emergency decision-making, and informed consent across various sections, particularly in *Sutrasthana*. This article critically analyses these ethical concepts and categorizes them into key domains, highlighting their continued relevance in contemporary surgical ethics and medico-legal practice.

Key Words *Sushruta Samhita, Surgical ethics, Shalya Tantra, Informed Consent, Professional conduct*

Received 18th March 2026 Accepted 01st May 2026 Published 10th May 2026

INTRODUCTION

Ethics is fundamental to surgical practice as it governs the behaviour, judgment, and clinical decisions of surgeons. Due to the invasive nature of surgical interventions and their potential risks, the ethical responsibility of a surgeon is significantly greater than in many other therapeutic fields.

In *Ayurveda*, ethical conduct is inseparable from medical knowledge. A physician is expected to maintain integrity, compassion, discipline, and competence in all aspects of practice. *Sushruta*, widely regarded as the pioneer of surgery,

viewed surgical practice as a sacred responsibility undertaken for the welfare of society.

The *Sushruta Samhita* not only provides detailed descriptions of surgical techniques, instruments, and procedures but also lays down comprehensive ethical guidelines that regulate every stage of surgical care. These ethical principles can be categorized into domains such as general ethics, professional and academic ethics, perioperative ethics, experimental training, emergency care, ethical conduct toward

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unqualified practitioners, and care for terminally ill patients.

GENERAL ETHICS

General ethics in the *Sushruta Samhita* primarily focuses on the essential qualities and responsibilities of medical students and physicians. The process of student initiation, including *Upanayana Vidhi* and oath-taking (*Pratijna Svikara*), reflects the importance of moral commitment in medical education¹.

A student of surgery is expected to be disciplined, attentive, hygienic, respectful towards the teacher, and dedicated to learning. *Sushruta* strongly emphasizes the integration of theoretical knowledge with practical training. A practitioner possessing both becomes competent, whereas reliance on only one aspect is considered inadequate².

The requirement of royal approval for surgical practice in ancient times indicates the presence of regulatory mechanisms comparable to modern registration systems³. Additionally, qualities such as clarity of communication, courage, efficiency, and ethical integrity are highlighted as essential for a successful surgeon.

PROFESSIONAL AND ACADEMIC ETHICS

Professional and academic ethics occupy a central place in the *Sushruta Samhita*. The teacher is expected to impart knowledge comprehensively, and the student must strive for a thorough understanding of all relevant concepts, including anatomy, physiology, pathology, and prognosis.

Sushruta emphasizes the importance of interdisciplinary knowledge, stating that no single branch of science is sufficient in isolation⁴. A surgeon must therefore be well-versed in allied disciplines to ensure effective clinical practice. The classification of diseases based on prognosis reflects ethical responsibility in patient communication. It is the duty of the surgeon to clearly explain the nature, outcome, and limitations of treatment to patients and their relatives. Surgical interventions performed due to ignorance, greed, fear, or confusion are strongly discouraged, as they may lead to serious harm or death⁵.

PRE-OPERATIVE, OPERATIVE, AND POST-OPERATIVE ETHICS

Sushruta emphasizes the importance of thorough history taking and clinical examination before surgical intervention. The concept of *Trividha Karma* – pre-operative, operative, and post-operative procedures – is clearly described.

Pre-operative ethics include proper preparation of the patient, obtaining consent, arranging necessary instruments, medicines, assistants, and ensuring nil by mouth before surgery⁶. Consent is strongly emphasized, particularly in procedures like *Asmari Chikitsa* and *Moodha Garbha Chikitsa*, where permission from the patient, relatives, or king is advised⁷.

Dalhana comments that performing surgery without consent makes the surgeon liable to severe punishment, highlighting the ethical and legal significance of consent.

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Operative ethics stress precision, calmness, cleanliness, and avoidance of unnecessary trauma. Surgery should not be performed in haste, anger, fear, or confusion⁵. Post-operative ethics include proper wound care, monitoring, *Samsarjana Karma*, and shifting the patient to a post-operative ward to ensure recovery.

EXPERIMENTAL SURGICAL ETHICS

Experimental surgical ethics are elaborately described in *Yogyasutreeya Adhyaya*. *Sushruta* advocates training on experimental models such as vegetables, leather bags, animal parts, and artificial structures before performing surgery on patients⁸.

This ethical approach aims to prevent patient harm due to inexperience. *Sushruta* states that a student trained adequately through these methods does not fail in surgical procedures, reflecting an advanced understanding of patient safety and competence-based training.

ETHICS IN EMERGENCY SURGERY

In emergency conditions, *Sushruta* permits deviation from routine protocols when immediate intervention is required to save life. Just as a burning house is extinguished without following normal procedures, emergency surgical measures should be undertaken promptly to prevent death⁹. This reflects ethical flexibility guided by the principle of beneficence, where saving life takes precedence over procedural formalities.

ETHICS REGARDING QUACKS (UNQUALIFIED PRACTITIONERS)

Sushruta strongly condemns quack practitioners (*Taskara Vaidya*)⁴. A true physician is one who

has systematically learned medicine from a *guru* and constantly engages in practice and revision. All others who practice medicine without proper training are considered quacks and pose a danger to society.

ETHICS TOWARDS THE DYING

In cases of incurable diseases and terminal conditions, *Sushruta* advises truthful communication, compassionate care, and avoidance of unnecessary painful interventions. The surgeon should provide comfort, psychological support, and spiritual reassurance, emphasizing dignity in death.

Relevance to Contemporary Surgical Ethics

The ethical principles articulated in *Sushruta Samhita* align closely with modern bioethical standards:

- **Beneficence:** Acting in the best interest of the patient
- **Non-maleficence:** Avoiding unnecessary harm
- **Autonomy:** Respecting patient consent and decision-making
- **Professional competence:** Ensuring adequate training and skill
- **Accountability:** Responsible and disciplined surgical conduct

These timeless guidelines highlight the universal and enduring relevance of *Ayurvedic* ethical thought in modern surgical practice.

CONCLUSION

The *Sushruta Samhita* presents a comprehensive and ethically sound framework for surgical

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practice. It emphasizes integrity, competence, patient welfare, informed consent, compassion, and accountability as essential elements of surgical care.

Despite being an ancient text, its ethical principles remain highly applicable in contemporary medical practice. Integrating these classical insights into modern surgical education can enhance professionalism, strengthen patient trust, and improve the quality of healthcare delivery.

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