

Code of professional and ethical conduct

By its Royal Charter, the Royal Society of Biology has the powers to promote, establish and support standards of professional skills and conduct.

Self-regulation is a common feature of professions in the United Kingdom and this document is a key part of fulfilling the Society's Charter.

Regulation of a Profession

A profession demands high standards of learning, practical experience and judgement in the application of the required skills. It must be governed by a code of ethical conduct and professional practice. Those who claim professional status must adhere to such a code and carry out their duties accordingly.

The Royal Society of Biology requires each of its members individually to uphold its Charter commitments. It has disciplinary regulations and procedures to ensure that high professional standards are maintained. There is a comprehensive and continuing responsibility for all members to act in such a way as to uphold the dignity and reputation of the subject, the profession and of the Society itself. Each member should conform to any specific requirements that the Society may from time to time prescribe in connection with particular circumstances.

The Royal Society of Biology provides advice in a variety of different ways in order to guide members on their professional duties and responsibilities. The guidance offered in this code applies to all fields of biological sciences. It is intended to complement and in no sense to conflict with more specific advice or, indeed, legislation that may apply to particular industries or professional pursuits.

The views in this code may be cited in any disciplinary enquiry. If a member is adversely criticised in a published report, or in the courts, such criticism may be regarded by the Royal Society of Biology as evidence of discreditable conduct and action under the Society's disciplinary regulations may be instigated.

The Society welcomes both professional biologists and those who do not work within the profession but have an interest in the subject. The "Guidance on Professional Practice" section below is focussed on members who continue to work as a professional biologist or present themselves as such across a broad remit including related areas such as policy, media and management activities.

The Code of Conduct of the Royal Society of Biology

The Council of the Royal Society of Biology has adopted the following Code of Conduct. This code is applicable to all members no matter their grade of membership.

1. All members have a duty to:

- observe the provisions of the Charter and Bylaws of the Society and any regulations made under them
- uphold the dignity and reputation of the profession of biology
- safeguard the public interest in matters of safety and health
- exercise their professional and personal skill and judgement to the best of their ability
- discharge their professional responsibilities with integrity.

2. In order to fulfil these duties, members shall give due attention to any general guidance on professional conduct, together with advice on specific issues, and should conform to any rulings on such matters that may be approved and issued from time to time by the Council of the Society.

3. Members are reminded of the declaration that they have signed:

If elected I agree to comply with Bylaw 21 which states: “All Individual Members of the Society shall exercise their professional skill and judgement to the best of their ability and discharge their professional responsibilities with integrity. They shall order their conduct as to uphold the dignity and reputation of the profession of biology and to safeguard the public interest in matters of safety and health and otherwise.”

4 All Members of any grade shall at all times conduct themselves having regard to the Fundamental Principles described below.

5. Members of all grades are also expected to fully understand and adhere to ethical issues relevant to their specific profession.

Fundamental Principles

The seven principles of public life (known as the Nolan principles¹) and “Rigour, respect, responsibility: a universal ethical code for scientists²” represent the standards expected of members of the Royal Society of Biology.

Members should

- i. behave with integrity, honesty, fairness and openness in all professional and business relationships
- ii. strive for objectivity in all professional and business judgements
- iii. maintain up to date skills and assist their development in others (whilst still professionally active) not knowingly accept or perform work which they are not competent to undertake, without obtaining such advice and assistance as will enable them competently to carry out the work

- iv. carry out their professional work with due skill, care, diligence and expedition, with proper regard for the health and safety, technical and professional standards expected of a member
- v. conduct themselves with courtesy and consideration
- vi. take steps to prevent corrupt practices and professional misconduct
- vii. declare and minimise conflicts of interest
- viii. be alert to the ways in which research derives from and affects the work of other people
- ix. respect the rights and reputations of others
- x. ensure that their work is lawful and justified
- xi. minimise and justify any adverse effect their work may have on people, animals and the natural environment
- xii. seek to discuss the issues that science raises for society, and listen to the aspirations and concerns of others
- xiii. not knowingly mislead, or allow others to be misled, about scientific and professional matters.

Guidance on Professional Practice

Society Members as Professionals

Members active in the profession have a responsibility for maintaining, improving and broadening their knowledge and skills to ensure continuing competence throughout their careers. This process is known as Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and is of increasing importance to all professional people. CPD can be carried out in a number of ways, for example through courses or seminars or by reading professional journals, or by networking with other professionals.

Society Members and Employment

As Employees:

Ethical Obligations

Members in all fields of employment should:

- fulfil their contractual responsibilities in letter and in spirit
- in serving the interests of their employer in good faith and to the best of their ability, always keep in mind the obligation to serve the public interest and maintain and enhance the reputation of the profession.

The interpretation of these principles will vary from job to job, but all members have an obligation to:

- apply knowledge and skills to the best of their ability
- share with their employer a high degree of trust and confidence.

As Managers or Employers

Members in managerial positions or who are employers have professional responsibilities by virtue of their position. They will influence others by giving instructions and also by example. In addition to meeting the ethical and contractual requirements that may apply, members have an obligation to:

- recognise the right of professionals within their team to exercise their discretion
- facilitate the professional development of all employees
- provide equal opportunities for all employees
- be accurate and fair in appraising the work of others
- ensure compliance with all regulatory requirements.

As Self-Employed Members

Much of the advice in the sections relating to the obligations of employees and managers is applicable to members who are self-employed.

As Members in Education

Members engaged in teaching at any level have a special responsibility. They lay the foundations on which scientific and professional standards will be built. They have an obligation not only to their students, but also the profession as a whole, because its future is determined by their influence on those of their students who ultimately become members of the Society. In addition to their other duties, they should set an example to their own and other students.

Members in further and higher education have an important influence on the ultimate professional and ethical standards of their students. The highest standards of personal integrity and attention to accuracy should be exercised in all scientific investigations and in the recording of results. Anything less is unscientific and incompatible with higher professional standards. In addition to imparting accurately the appropriate factual and scientific information, members should be aware of the ethical and societal implications of their work.

Members who have a responsibility for the health and safety of students in laboratories or in fieldwork must ensure that they and their students observe all relevant safety practices.

Members active in research, research-led teaching and related fields shall ensure they operate in accordance with the Concordat on Research Integrity:

<http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Documents/2012/TheConcordatToSupportResearchIntegrity.pdf>

Society Members as Consultants

Consultants are subject to Council Regulation 3.6. Regard must be had to this Regulation in addition to this Code.

All consultants must maintain a confidential relationship with clients and must not divulge information obtained from clients to a third party. This may preclude the consultant from accepting work from another client working in the same field as an existing client. At the outset of any consultancy work, the consultant and clients should agree on, and have a clear understanding of:

- the objective of the consultation
- working arrangements
- the assignments of any patents or intellectual property arising from the consultation
- the scope and manner of reporting including publication
- the estimated cost or the basis for charging.

Consultants should ensure that they have sufficient professional indemnity insurance cover.

The main duty of a consultant is to further the interests of the clients but there are also duties towards other consultants. Members should not attempt to poach another consultant's clients by attacking the consultant's reputation or improperly soliciting for work.

Consultants may have direct contact with the public and so have an influence on the perception of the profession.

Members in Society

Serving the Public Interest

All members have responsibilities arising from their fundamental duty to serve the public interest and will be concerned with the progress of their science and the use to which it is put. The Society expects members to use their skills to advance and safeguard the welfare of humanity, particularly in the fields of health, safety and the environment.

Members and Legislation

Members active in the profession should be aware of the general principles of law relating to health and safety, environmental protection, personal negligence, discrimination and human rights and data protection. In addition, members should be aware of the legislation relating to many specialised fields of scientific work.

The fact that it is not a member's primary job to monitor legislation is not an excuse for ignorance of the law in the event of a breach. If members are aware that legal requirements are being overlooked, they have a duty to put their objections on record and to do all they can to put matters right. Failure to act may count as consent, connivance or neglect in connection with any offence and could result in charges being brought against the member as an individual.

Impact on the Environment

Members should use their knowledge and experience for the protection and improvement of the environment. In addition to legal obligations, members also have a duty to minimise adverse effects on the environment, to recommend and use best environmental practice, and to seek opportunities to promote sustainable development.

Media Reporting

While the UK has many excellent science journalists, media coverage may not always be balanced, accurate or objective.

Members intending to communicate with the media are advised to undertake media training. Many employers and funding bodies offer such training.

Members may be interviewed by reporters or representatives of newspapers and magazines, and may be asked to appear on radio or television. They should bear in mind that what they say may be taken as representing general opinion among members and other practitioners of science.

The Society's name must not be used to imply its endorsement of personal views under any circumstances.

Publications, Lectures and Contributions to Electronic Media

The highest standards of integrity are required of members submitting scientific papers for publication. Considerations that apply to broadcast and press interviews apply equally to other forms of communication such as books, lectures and contributions to electronic media.

Authors should be aware of intellectual property laws governing copyright. In particular they should:

- obtain written permission from the copyright holder for the reproduction of figures, photographs, charts, drawings, tables and other direct quotations
- guard against wrongful disclosures of confidential information, especially relating to current research and development work. Specific written approval should be obtained from the appropriate organisation or individual
- give due acknowledgement to past scientific work, and to all substantial help and advice received. Omissions and mistakes can lead to defamation actions because reputations may be involved
- it may be necessary to obtain written permission from their employer before signing a contract with a publisher even if the subject matter is not directly related to employment. The Society's name must not be used to imply its endorsement of personal views under any circumstances.

Society Members and Evidence

Public Committees

Members may be called on to give evidence to governmental or parliamentary committees or other public bodies. If this occurs, they may wish to contact the Society for advice about procedures.

Members should study the relevant body's terms of reference and establish the capacity in which he/she will appear. This could be as a representative of an employer, representative of an industry, as an independent expert, or as an interested member of the public. If an enquiry is being held to consider matters of relevance to members generally, the Society will probably make written or oral submissions of its own, and this will almost certainly involve consulting many members.

A member who expects to give evidence before such an enquiry in a personal capacity, on a matter that may affect Society members generally, is encouraged to contact the Society in advance. The Society will be able to offer advice and information to the member, and will find it useful to be aware of the subject of the enquiry.

Endorsement by the Society should not be claimed unless obtained in advance and in writing.

Tribunals and Committees of Enquiry

After a major accident, or other incident that has given rise to public concern, a tribunal or committee of enquiry may be set up. The powers of such tribunals vary, but they usually follow procedures similar to those used in the courts except that no charges are brought. At the end of such a hearing, a report is submitted. If serious criticism, or allegations of default, negligence or misconduct are made in the report, then legal proceedings may follow.

Enquiries and tribunals often seek to determine whether incompetence, misjudgement or neglect on the part of professional people caused or contributed to the accident or incident.

Members called to take part in such an enquiry should establish the capacity in which they are being called in advance.

Unless called as a completely independent witness with no previous involvement in the events leading to the incident, members should normally seek personal legal advice before the hearing. This is in addition to any legal advice that their employer may provide. They should make sure that legal advice and consultation are available to them throughout the proceedings so that evidence damaging to them may be questioned on their behalf.

A full transcript of the proceedings is usually available before publication. Witnesses should exercise their right to receive any such copy and to challenge any misleading statement relating to the evidence. The Society is not able to present the cases of members called before tribunals or committees of enquiry. Members should seek to ensure that they are adequately represented. The Society may also decide to have its own representative present when a question of principle is raised which affects the profession as a whole.

Members as Expert Witnesses

The function of an expert witness is to assist a court in elucidating the technical or scientific evidence that is to be used as part of a lawsuit.

Whilst it is clearly the duty of the expert witness to be concerned with the interests of the client, the member's evidence must nevertheless be objective and strictly confined to matters on which the witness can speak authoritatively and from personal knowledge. An obviously biased attitude in a case would detract from the value of the evidence, and also cast doubt upon the integrity of the witness.

All expert witnesses should aim to establish their expertise with courtesy and with the highest professional integrity. They should also appreciate that if two parties produce their own experts there may be disagreement in the views presented by the experts. If alternative interpretations are put forward in good faith and with skill and moderation the court will respect the integrity of the opposing expert even if it has to accept one argument and reject the other.

Society Members outside the United Kingdom

The Society acknowledges that problems may arise in applying its requirements to members who are working outside the United Kingdom. Laws and social customs in various parts of the world differ. Nevertheless all members of the Society accept the same obligation on admission to the Society.

The Bylaws of the Society provide specific powers for expulsion and suspension of members found guilty of any criminal offence involving fraud or dishonesty, or for any other offence which casts doubt on their fitness to practice. The term "criminal offence" when used in these cases applies to offences defined by the law of the country in which the offence took place.

When dealing with allegations about a member's conduct, the Society will take all relevant matters into account, including the laws and customs of the country in which the actions took place and which gave rise to the allegation.

All members, wherever they are resident or employed, are required to share the same allegiance to the Society. Equally the Society will provide appropriate support and advice to its members worldwide by face-to-face contact, telephone, email or its website.

References

¹ The seven principles of public life (Nolan principles)
www.public-standards.gov.uk/Library/Seven_principles.doc

² Rigour, respect, responsibility: a universal ethical code for scientists
www.berr.gov.uk/files/file41318.pdf