

Code of Conduct of the Swiss College of Surgeons

1. Introduction

The present Code of Conduct is intended to serve as a guide and is addressed to all members of the specialist societies under the umbrella of the Swiss College of Surgeons (SCS). It articulates shared values and expectations that guide professional conduct and thereby creates a binding foundation for all those involved. The Code aims to ensure a respectful, fair, and safe working environment.

The parent organisation expressly commits itself to equal treatment, diversity, and non-discriminatory collaboration, as well as to a work environment that safeguards physical and personal integrity, and takes a firm stand against the abuse of power. This stance is rooted in respect for human dignity, the principles of respect, integrity, and professionalism, and in Swiss legislation.¹

In addition to existing pledges such as the Hippocratic Oath, the Declaration of Geneva of the World Medical Association, the new Swiss Physicians' Oath, and the existing rules of conduct of hospitals, the SCS uses this Code of Conduct to emphasise the importance of a critical approach to power and to strengthen structures that protect against transgressions. All members are called upon to embody these core values in their respective work environments.

2. Specific Rules of Conduct in Professional Everyday Life

2.1 Culture of Mindfulness and Tolerance for Mistakes

- 1) Aware that boundary violations, abuse of power, and discrimination usually begin in seemingly harmless situations, members remain vigilant for signs of misconduct, conflict, or harassment and take action at an early stage.
- 2) A conscious and constructive approach to mistakes – one that prioritises improvement and the assumption of responsibility – together with the ability to express and receive criticism openly and respectfully, is part of the professional attitude of all members.

2.2 Integrity and Respect

Integrity describes an attitude of honesty, sincerity, and straightforwardness.

- *Physical integrity refers to every person's right to bodily inviolability and to protection from violence, abuse and unwanted intervention.*
- 1) Personal integrity encompasses the right to protection of one's personality, thoughts, and emotions. This includes respectful treatment, protection from humiliation, discrimination, or psychological pressure, and the safeguarding of individual dignity.
 - 2) Members act reliably, transparently, and in line with shared values – even when no immediate oversight is in place.
 - 3) Members respect personal boundaries and contribute to a working climate that protects the physical and psychological integrity of all.
 - 4) Respectful behaviour is binding in all situations.

¹ The following bases of federal legislation are of particular importance for members with regard to respectful and integral behaviour in the workplace: Federal Act on Work in Industry, Trade and Commerce (Labour Act, ArG) of 13 March 1964 (status as of 1 September 2023); Federal Act on the Amendment of the Swiss Civil Code (Part Five: Code of Obligations) of 30 March 1911 (status as of 1 October 2025); Federal Act on Gender Equality (Gender Equality Act, GlG) of 24 March 1995 (status as of 1 July 2020); Swiss Criminal Code of 21 December 1937 (status as of 1 August 2025).

2.3 Equal Opportunities and Non-Discrimination

Discrimination refers to the unjustified unequal treatment of persons based on an actual or attributed affiliation with a particular group, such as national, ethnic, or social origin, skin colour, age, gender, sexual orientation, religion, language, world view, disabilities, or similar characteristics.

- 1) Members strive to ensure equal opportunities in the working environment. Through equal treatment – or, where preconditions differ, through targeted support – every person is given fair opportunities for professional development.
- 2) Members act free from discrimination and refrain from any actions or statements that disadvantage, exclude, demean, restrict, favour, or deny equal access to other people.
- 3) Members with decision-making authority act as role models and advocate for non-discriminatory structures, organisations, and institutions.
- 4) Decisions on remuneration, promotion, further training, and other professional opportunities are made free of discrimination. Disadvantages based on gender, origin, age, sexual orientation, religion, language, disability, or other personal characteristics are not permitted.

2.4 Handling Boundaries

- 1) Professional conduct requires a conscious approach to closeness and distance. Excessive or inappropriate closeness as well as demeaning distance can violate integrity. A reflective approach to boundaries protects all parties and safeguards dignity in the working environment.
- 2) Exerting pressure, promising advantages, or demanding favours based on closeness or hierarchical relationships is not permitted.
- 3) Boundary violations are clearly named; those affected are supported in defending themselves and in making use of available support services.
- 4) The classification of boundary violations is guided by the needs of those affected. Boundary violations in the grey area between appropriate and inappropriate behaviour are also taken seriously, and transgressions are addressed respectfully.

2.5 Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment in the workplace encompasses any unwanted act of a sexual nature that demeans a person or a group based on their gender or sexual orientation. This includes unwanted physical contact, suggestive remarks, evaluative looks, the display of pornographic material, the demanding of favours, as well as threats or pressure.

- 1) Members watch for signs of possible sexual harassment and respect the personal boundaries of all.
- 2) Members support those affected and take a clear stance against sexual harassment.
- 3) Members with leadership responsibility take reports seriously and handle them, within the scope of their duty of care under labour law, with the necessary diligence.

2.6 Handling Power and Dependencies

Power refers to the ability or possibility to influence other people or to determine matters concerning them. In the professional context, power is often linked to relationships of dependency. These describe constellations in which one person is subordinate to another and is therefore particularly vulnerable. They arise in particular through hierarchical structures (for example between supervisors and staff or between training supervisors and students) as well as through powers of evaluation and decision-making, for example in the context of performance reviews, contract extensions, remuneration, letters of recommendation, or the allocation of resources.

- 1) Persons in leadership positions exercise their power responsibly, behave professionally, and follow rules that protect and support those reporting to them.
- 2) Power and relationships of dependency must not be abused for personal ends, for example by promising advantages, threatening disadvantages, behaving in a discriminatory manner, or taking actions that violate integrity.

2.7 Violence and Bullying

Violence injures personal integrity and encompasses physical and psychological assaults as well as verbal or structural acts that impair the well-being, safety, or dignity of persons in the workplace. Violence may have racist, sexual, or other discriminatory dimensions, is often associated with the abuse of power, and can also take subtle forms.

Bullying refers to the systematic exclusion and humiliation of a person over a longer period of time with the aim of isolating them or driving them out. Unequal power relations are often decisive here. Examples include the assignment of meaningless tasks, the devaluation of performance, or the withholding of important information.

- 1) Violence and bullying are not tolerated in any form.
- 2) Members with leadership responsibility take the necessary measures within the meaning of the Federal Labour Act to protect the personal integrity of employees.

2.8 Conflicts of Interest and Compliance

Conflicts of interest exist when personal interests – such as financial advantages, private relationships, or secondary activities – impair professional decision-making freedom or create the appearance of bias. Compliance refers to the obligation to observe all applicable laws, internal directives, and professional ethical standards.

- 1) Compliance with laws, directives, and pledges is mandatory for all members.
- 2) Violations of these standards are deemed misconduct and include abuse of power, discrimination, harassment, intimidating behaviour, or persistently disrespectful conduct.
- 3) Private relationships within an institution must be disclosed by members, particularly in hierarchical contexts. Disclosure serves transparency and protects the integrity of professional conduct.

3. Recommendations

3.1 Prevention Efforts

- 1) Persons with leadership responsibility contribute to awareness of the topics of power, violence, and discrimination through further training and information measures. They advocate for the legally enshrined obligation to prevent sexual harassment within their institutions.
- 2) All members make use of existing further training opportunities to engage with topics such as sexual harassment, bullying, and discrimination in the workplace.

3.2 Classification Aid

Institutions, employers, and employed specialist physicians can use the following classification aid to orient themselves when boundary violations or abuse of power are suspected.

Minor Boundary Violation	Moderate Boundary Violation	Severe Boundary Violation
Workplace conflict Inappropriate behaviour or remarks Disagreements between equals Often unintentional Often a one-off occurrence	Misconduct Inappropriate behaviour with elements of abuse of power and/or discrimination Often vague, diffuse, unclear Suspected intent Repeated occurrences	Crisis Situations requiring heightened protection (violence, harassment, bullying, clear abuse of power) Concrete suspicion Cases requiring immediate measures Criminal offences Violations of the Gender Equality Act Challenges that must be stopped

		Situations in which reputational damage is feared
<p><i>Everyday challenges that can be resolved internally and offer an opportunity for development.</i></p> <p>Feedback culture Open conversations Apologies, signing of binding agreements, goals, measures Further training, seminars, workshops Role-model function Documentation</p>	<p><i>To be resolved with the four-eyes principle and increased attention. Where appropriate, external bodies, HR, and/or the next higher level are consulted.</i></p> <p>Structured feedback Supervision Coaching Round tables Labour-law/formal procedure Definition of suitable measures Documentation Information forwarded to the responsible bodies</p>	<p><i>Standard involvement of HR and line management. Where appropriate, external bodies and authorities are consulted.</i></p> <p>Protection of those affected (forensic measures, physical separation) Labour-law/formal procedure (warning, reprimand, transfer, dismissal, and further personnel-law consequences) Definition of suitable measures</p>

3.3 Reporting Procedures and Possible Courses of Action in Institutions

Informal procedures comprise advice and triage by internal trusted persons without supervisory function or by external counselling services. They are confidential and do not lead to consequences under labour law. Further steps or the informing of supervisors and management only take place with the consent of the person affected.

When a report is made to supervisors or to the human resources department, a formal procedure begins on the basis of the legally enshrined duty of care. In such cases, confidentiality cannot be fully maintained, since further persons must be involved for clarification (the accused person, HR, supervisors, witnesses). This investigation is documented, and recommendations for resolving the conflict are formulated.

Formal procedures may have consequences under labour law.

- 1) Internal trusted persons and clearly designated external contact points (cf. Annex 2) should ideally be available for complaints (informal procedure).
- 2) Formal internal procedures are clearly defined and transparent.
- 3) All conversations are documented (minutes for formal procedures cf. Annex 3).
- 4) For situations that cannot be resolved internally, an external investigation is recommended.
- 5) Whistleblowers who draw attention to misconduct are protected.

3.4 Process for Incidents of Boundary Violations in Institutions

It is recommended that the procedure for handling boundary violations be set down in writing and presented in an idealised form. Annex 1 illustrates how to proceed and what should be documented.

4. Final Provisions

- 1) The SCS commits itself to this Code of Conduct and considers the principles set out in it as guiding for its members.
- 2) The scope also encompasses all activities carried out within the framework of the specialist societies.
- 3) The Code of Conduct is reviewed regularly and adapted to current challenges and needs as required.
- 4) It lies within the discretion of the constituent organisations to verify compliance and implementation as well as to determine further measures in cases of violation.

Effective from 1 May 2026.

On behalf of the SCS Board

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'M. K. Widmer', is positioned above the printed name of the Secretary General.

Prof. Dr. med. S. Holland-Cunz
President SCS

Prof. Dr. med. et MME emerit. M. K. Widmer
Secretary General SCS

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Annex 1 – Further Information on How to Proceed in Cases of Misconduct

Note: The links to examples from other institutions enable a deeper engagement with the topic of misconduct. They focus on sexual harassment but can also be applied to other boundary transgressions.

General Information

https://www.ebg.admin.ch/dam/de/sd-web/J8NhW18NbYX2/allgemeine_hinweisezumreglement.pdf

Procedural Steps

<https://www.ebg.admin.ch/dam/de/sd-web/ExMe2fW1CDes/verfahrensschritte.pdf>

Procedure from the Perspective of an Accused Person

https://www.pa.fin.be.ch/content/dam/pa_fin/dokumente/de/themen/bgm/gesundheitsschutz/konzept-gegen-sexuelle-bel%C3%A4stigung/Prozess%20beschuldigte%20Person_sexuelle%20Bel%C3%A4stigung.pdf

Procedure from the Perspective of an Affected Person

https://www.pa.fin.be.ch/content/dam/pa_fin/dokumente/de/themen/bgm/gesundheitsschutz/konzept-gegen-sexuelle-bel%C3%A4stigung/Prozess%20betroffene%20Person_sexuelle%20Bel%C3%A4stigung.pdf

Conversation Guide

<https://www.ebg.admin.ch/dam/de/sd-web/TiqFF5o2u3Je/gesprachsleitfadenfueransprechpersonen.pdf>

Responsibilities

https://www.ebg.admin.ch/dam/de/sd-web/wjDKqQXTdDwj/funktionen_und_verantwortlichkeiten.pdf

Annex 2 – Counselling Services and Support Offers

Regional Counselling Centres of Victim Support Switzerland

<https://www.opferhilfe-schweiz.ch/de/wo-finde-ich-hilfe/>

Counselling for Sexual Harassment

<https://belaestigt.ch/>

Specialist Office for Bullying

<https://www.fachstelle-mobbing.ch/>

Cantonal Conciliation Authorities

<https://www.lex4you.ch/de/lex-search/arbeiten/arbeitsvertrag/documents/adressen-anlaufstellen#schlichtungsbehoerden>

Conciliation Boards under the Gender Equality Act

https://www.ebg.admin.ch/dam/de/sd-web/7bpL3n-aWXYu/Adressen_Schlichtungsstellen%20nach%20GG.pdf

Annex 3 Sample Minutes of a Conversation Concerning Complaints and Boundary Violations

(For institutions, employers, HR)

Delete or fill in yellow-highlighted fields.

1. Opening of the Conversation / Information

- ☐ It matters to those leading the conversation to clarify situations in which possible misconduct or a boundary violation is at issue in a fair, respectful, and objective manner. The aim is to ensure a safe environment for patients and for staff.
- ☐ Conversations with accused or affected persons in connection with a possible boundary violation are always conducted with particular care and sensitivity. To ensure fairness, transparency, and mutual safeguarding, two internal persons are always involved in conducting the conversation.
- ☐ The accused or affected person has the right to involve an additional professional or private support person. Was this communicated in advance?
- ☐ The protection of the personal integrity of all those involved has the highest priority. Accused persons are protected just as those affected. Premature judgements are not permitted.
- ☐ The conversations are confidential. Employers are bound by professional secrecy. Where a possible offence subject to public prosecution or an acute threat is at issue, it may be necessary to take steps in which confidentiality cannot be fully maintained.
- ☐ All information is to be treated confidentially. It may, however, be necessary to involve further persons, for example in the context of witness interviews or labour-law clarifications. Communication to the team, patients, relatives, or the public takes place exclusively via the responsible management persons. If required, specialist offices, experts, or authorities can be consulted.
- ☐ These minutes serve as a basis for the further procedure. They contain solely the accounts of the persons questioned, not the interpretations of those leading the conversation. At the end of the conversation, the minutes are read and signed by all persons present.
- ☐ The affected and accused persons are not permitted to confront one another independently. Discussions take place exclusively in the presence of leadership persons and after prior agreement. This ensures that complaints and boundary violations are handled within a clearly structured, fair, and responsible framework.
- ☐ The person involved has been informed about the situation and about the reasons for which they have been invited to this conversation (cf. point 4 "Content of the Report").

2. Minutes

Date: xx.xx.xxxx

- ☐ Conversation with accused person
- ☐ Conversation with affected person

3. Information on Persons Involved

Function	Name
Affected person	
Person leading the conversation	
Internal second person (taking minutes)	
Accused person	
Support person (if present)	

4. Content of the Report / Description of the Situation

What is the accused person being charged with?

Date	Description
xx.xx.xxxx	
xx.xx.xxxx	
xx.xx.xxxx	

5. Content of the Report / Situation / Boundary Violation (cf. complaint form if applicable)

What was the accused person charged with, and through which channel?

Date	Description
xx.xx.xxxx	
xx.xx.xxxx	
xx.xx.xxxx	

6. Position of the Affected Person

Guiding questions:

- 1) How are you? Do you feel able to talk about the situation? (If not: documentation, or – where justifiable – termination and planning of a new framework, e.g. with a support person or external moderation.)
- 2) Is this conversational setting appropriate for you, and are you here voluntarily?
- 3) What happened? Please describe the objective course of events.
- 4) When did it happen?
- 5) Who was involved? Were there any witnesses?
- 6) Do you have any other evidence or documentation of the events?
- 7) How did you experience the situation?
- 8) What unsettled, hurt, or disturbed you?
- 9) Did you react to the situation? If so, how?
- 10) What courses of action do you see?
- 11) What do you expect from the accused person, from the team, and from management?
- 12) Do you require further counselling or support (referral to internal and external bodies)?

Text field – verbatim minutes

7. Position of the Accused Person

Guiding questions:

- 1) How are you? Do you feel able to talk about the situation?
- 2) Is this conversational setting appropriate for you, and are you here voluntarily? (If not: documentation, or – where justifiable – termination and planning of a new framework, e.g. with a support person or external moderation.)
- 3) What, in your view, has happened? Please describe the course of events.
- 4) When did it happen?
- 5) Who was involved? Were there any witnesses?
- 6) The following statements by the affected person have been brought to our attention... To what extent does the perception described differ from yours?
- 7) How did you experience the situation?
- 8) Did you react? If so, how?
- 9) What courses of action or recommendations do you see for the further handling of the situation?
- 10) What do you expect from the team and from management?

Text field – verbatim minutes

8. Further Procedure

The participants determine the following next steps and measures:

Measure	Responsible	Deadline

The case is closed

☐ Yes

☐ No

Date and signatures of all parties involved

Name 1 Name 2 Name 3 Name 4