

The Hague Ethical Guidelines

Applying the norms of the practice of chemistry to support the Chemical Weapons Convention

The responsible practice of chemistry improves the quality of life of humankind and the environment. Through their many peaceful uses, such as in research and industry, chemicals play an essential role in this improvement. However, some chemicals can also be used as chemical weapons or to create them, and these weapons are among the most horrific in the world.

The 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) embodies the powerful international norm against chemical weapons, requiring its States Parties *“never under any circumstances: (a) To develop, produce, otherwise acquire, stockpile or retain chemical weapons, or transfer, directly or indirectly, chemical weapons to anyone; (b) To use chemical weapons; (c) To engage in any military preparations to use chemical weapons; (d) To assist, encourage or induce, in any way, anyone to engage in any activity prohibited to a State Party under this Convention.”* The task of destroying the world’s declared stockpiles of chemical weapons is close to completion, but the threats that the use of chemicals as weapons pose to global security have not yet been eliminated.

As destruction of the remaining chemical weapons continues, a concerted effort is needed to prevent their re-emergence. This includes training and raising awareness among chemistry practitioners, defined as anyone trained in chemistry as well as others dealing with or handling chemicals. Their support is needed so that production and use of chemicals is accompanied by recognition of the responsibility to ensure that they are applied solely for peaceful and beneficial purposes. Fortunately, ethical standards established by the global chemistry community already provide a foundation. Building on that foundation, a group of experts from 24 countries from all regions of the world convened to define and harmonize key elements of ethical guidelines as they relate to chemical weapons based on existing codes.¹

Such codes are primary ways through which the community’s ethical standards are addressed. The key elements presented in this text should be incorporated into new and existing codes in order to align with the provisions of the CWC. A code need not mention chemical weapons or the CWC to support its basic goals, and provisions may need to be tailored for particular sectors or circumstances, while still reflecting the fundamental values. Taken together, “The Hague Ethical Guidelines” provide the key elements that should be applied universally.

¹ “Code” is used as a general term and includes the full range of such documents, from aspirational statements such as the Hippocratic Oath to codes that are enforceable, for example as part of a practitioner’s terms of employment.

The Key Elements

Core element. Achievements in the field of chemistry should be used to benefit humankind and protect the environment.

Sustainability. Chemistry practitioners have a special responsibility for promoting and achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals of meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Education. Formal and informal educational providers, enterprise, industry and civil society should cooperate to equip anybody working in chemistry and others with the necessary knowledge and tools to take responsibility for the benefit of humankind, the protection of the environment and to ensure relevant and meaningful engagement with the general public.

Awareness and engagement. Teachers, chemistry practitioners, and policymakers should be aware of the multiple uses of chemicals, specifically their use as chemical weapons or their precursors. They should promote the peaceful applications of chemicals and work to prevent any misuse of chemicals, scientific knowledge, tools and technologies, and any harmful or unethical developments in research and innovation. They should disseminate relevant information about national and international laws, regulations, policies and practices.

Ethics. To adequately respond to societal challenges, education, research and innovation must respect fundamental rights and apply the highest ethical standards. Ethics should be perceived as a way of ensuring high quality results in science.

Safety and Security. Chemistry practitioners should promote the beneficial applications, uses, and development of science and technology while encouraging and maintaining a strong culture of safety, health, and security.

Accountability. Chemistry practitioners have a responsibility to ensure that chemicals, equipment and facilities are protected against theft and diversion and are not used for illegal, harmful or destructive purposes. These persons should be aware of applicable laws and regulations governing the manufacture and use of chemicals, and they should report any misuse of chemicals, scientific knowledge, equipment and facilities to the relevant authorities.

Oversight. Chemistry practitioners who supervise others have the additional responsibility to ensure that chemicals, equipment and facilities are not used by those persons for illegal, harmful or destructive purposes.

Exchange of information. Chemistry practitioners should promote the exchange of scientific and technical information relating to the development and application of chemistry for peaceful purposes.

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