

## Liberal Health Professions in the European Union: Concepts, Ethics, and a Call for Harmonization

### Profissões Liberais de Saúde na União Europeia: Conceitos, Ética e um Apelo à Harmonização

**Keywords:** Europe; Health Personnel/ethics

**Palavras-chave:** Europa; Pessoal de Saúde/ética

There is a longstanding tradition of autonomy, independence, and socially valued regulation in the organization of the liberal professions, a tradition that has continuously evolved to the present day. The values that inspire liberal professions can only be upheld in free and democratic societies that respect and protect their autonomy.<sup>1,2</sup>

The report "The State of Liberal Professions Concerning their Functions and Relevance to European Civil Society"<sup>1</sup> notes that, "historically, according to Cicero and Seneca, these were activities worthy of a free person, and their learning was indeed a necessity for every free Roman citizen. The practice of the *artes liberales* was therefore a privilege of free citizens."

The modern understanding of the concept of the 'liberal profession' has fortunately evolved. Until the eighteenth century, the term '*artes liberales*' continued to refer to 'intellectual' activities.<sup>3</sup> At that point, the term ceased to denote the personal attribute of 'free birth' and became associated instead with the professional activity itself. Since the time of Hippocrates, health professions – particularly medical ones – have embraced a set of principles rooted in values that have continually evolved. At one of its earliest meetings, held in Philadelphia (1847), the American Medical Association (AMA) adopted a resolution on medical ethics, inspired by an earlier work written by Thomas Percival. One of the themes that began to emerge in Percival's code, and later gained prominence in the AMA's code – is the tension between a physician's duty to the individual patient and the broader obligations owed to society.<sup>4</sup> Across the European Union, the liberal professions in member states are characterized by two fundamental dimensions: their collective

organization and, deriving from it, a well-established tradition of self-regulation.<sup>5</sup>

According to the Rome Manifesto (2017),<sup>6</sup> adopted by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), "... Liberal professions involve the provision of intellectual services grounded in specific qualifications or professional training. These services are distinguished by a personal dimension and are built upon a foundation of trust. Liberal professionals carry out their activities with personal responsibility and professional independence, guided by ethical standards, committed to serving both their clients' interests and the common good, and operating within a structured system of professional organization and oversight. This definition is not exhaustive but remains open to new technological developments and new professions."

Liberal professions are characterized by varying degrees of autonomy and independence, as well as by adherence to their own ethical and deontological codes. These principles are expressed through a set of duties aimed at fostering public trust among consumers and citizens alike, thereby affirming the public-interest nature of professional self-regulation.

As these values, principles, and duties continue to be fragmented across multiple frameworks, it becomes imperative to consolidate and systematize them, encouraging thoughtful consideration of their alignment and effective implementation throughout Europe.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author has declared that no AI tools were used during the preparation of this work.

#### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

#### FUNDING SOURCES

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

#### REFERENCES

- European Economic and Social Committee, Ulmer K, Moll N, Dorando T, Hesse C, Arentz O, et al. The state of liberal professions concerning their functions and relevance to European civil society. Brussels: European Economic and Social Committee; 2014.
- European Union. Communication from the commission - report on competition in professional services /\* COM/2004/0083 final. [cited 2025 Jan 26]. Available from: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX%3A52004DC0083>.
- Costa Nunes RA. As artes liberais na idade média. Rev História. 1975;26:3-23.
- Veatch RM. Cross-cultural perspectives in medical ethics. Boston: Jones and Bartlett; 2000.
- Wendt IE. EU competition law and liberal professions: an uneasy relationship? Rotterdam: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers; 2012.
- European Economic and Social Committee. Manifesto: Definitions of the concept of liberal profession at European level. [cited 2024 Dez 04]. Available from: <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/documents/manifesto-definitions-concept-liberal-profession-european-level>.

Orlando José MENDES MONTEIRO DA SILVA 

1. Faculdade de Medicina. Universidade do Porto. Porto. Portugal.

✉ Autor correspondente: Orlando José Mendes Monteiro da Silva. [orlando@orlando.pt](mailto:orlando@orlando.pt)

Received/Received: 03/11/2025 - Accepted/Accepted: 04/11/2025 - Published Online/Published Online: 09/12/2025 - Published/Published: 02/01/2026

Copyright © Ordem dos Médicos 2026

<https://doi.org/10.20344/amp.24185>

