

Report on a Case by the Board of Ethical Review

Case No. 64-7

Subject: Signature of Responsible Engineer on Plans

Section 14-Code of Ethics; Section 14 (a)-Code of Ethics.

Facts:

A professional engineer employed as an assistant sanitary engineer in a state health department is responsible for the administration of certain programs which require approval of plans for proposed water supply and sewage treatment facilities and for the issuance of permits for such projects, as prescribed by state law. His immediate supervisor is the district sanitary engineer, also a professional engineer.

The policy and practice of the office is that all approval of plans and issuance of permits are under the signature of the district sanitary engineer, although the assistant sanitary engineer performs the actual engineering review in the great majority of applications. The policy of the office also provides that when the district sanitary engineer is absent the assistant sanitary engineer shall review the plans and applications for permits and, after approval, sign the name of the district sanitary engineer, even though the district sanitary engineer has not seen or reviewed the documents.

Question:

Is it ethical for a professional engineer to sign the name of another professional engineer to engineering documents?

References:

Code of Ethics-Section 14- "The Engineer will give credit for engineering work to those to whom credit is due, and will recognize the proprietary interests of others."

Section 14 (a)-"Whenever possible, he will name the person or persons who may be individually responsible for designs, inventions, writings, or other accomplishments."

Discussion:

The thrust of Section 14 and Section 14 (a) is that individual accomplishments and the assumption of responsibility by individual engineers should be recognized by other engineers. This principle is not only fair and in the best interests of the profession, but it also recognizes that the professional engineer must assume personal responsibility for his decisions and actions.

It is not unusual for the engineer in charge to sign his name and title to engineering documents which were prepared or reviewed by his subordinates under his supervision. There is no criticism of this practice, since it is based on the requirement that the engineer attaching his signature is familiar with and has checked the work involved.

In this case, however, the facts are that the assistant sanitary engineer on occasion reviews the engineering documents on his own responsibility and without the supervision or verification of the district sanitary engineer. In that case it is obvious that the assistant sanitary engineer takes sole responsibility for the decision to approve the plans or authorize the issuance of a permit. On that basis he alone should sign the engineering documents.

We see no objection, however, in the interests of clarity and continuity of authority, for the approval to indicate by stamp or printing the name of the district sanitary engineer, provided his name is followed by the name and signature of the assistant sanitary engineer. This will indicate that the approval is under the general authority of the district sanitary engineer and that the assistant sanitary engineer is acting within the scope of a delegation of authority to pass professional judgment on his own responsibility.

We think that the matter" of credit for engineering work is a factor in this consideration; but that this is secondary to the more important principle of a clear indication of professional responsibility.

Conclusion:

It is not ethical for a professional engineer to sign the name of another professional engineer to engineering documents; hence, it follows that it is also unethical for a professional engineer to permit or require such action.

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