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ETHICS AND PROFESSIONALISM

Dana Chamberlain, DDS

As you might expect, the process of gathering information for this article began with a “Google search” for dental ethics. One quickly discovers that ethics is a broad, confusing, and complex subject. Answers to ethical questions frequently contain the phrase “it depends.” We would hope that ethics could be clearly based on “universal truths”; however, the reality is that religious, cultural, and situational variations can modify these truths.

“The key idea is that ‘as a professional, patients, who are vulnerable, can count on us to serve them well. Our patients do not understand their dental situation deeply and must rely on us to care for them.’”

I was fortunate to stumble across a working draft of the 2017 edition of the “Dental Ethics Primer” written for dental students and residents by Drs. Bruce Peltier and Larry Jenson. I am basing this article on their section on professionalism and the nature of professions. While I have attempted to use enough of my own verbiage and understanding to avoid plagiarism, I give them total credit for their clear discussion of the topic.

The concept of professionalism is an integral part of Dental Ethics and is more

than a standard of grooming and dress or public behavior. Being a member of a learned profession confers on us certain privileges as well as corresponding responsibilities.

The key idea is that “as a professional, patients, who are vulnerable, can count on us to serve them well. Our patients do not understand their dental situation deeply and must rely on us to care for them. In fact, they must trust us to tell them what they need to know and to do an excellent job. They have no effective way to evaluate what we did, so they must assume we did the right thing. This difference in the power and informational dynamics of the relationship is what makes it unique and makes professional behavior so important.”

The authors describe five components of their definition of professionalism.

First, professionals possess valuable and exclusive expertise that is rare and requires years of difficult training, at considerable expense to learn and maintain. We use materials and instruments that are unavailable to the public, and our skills are of considerable value to the community. Professionals refrain from taking advantage of their status for undue personal gain. Our specialized expertise and status constitute a monopoly that is protected by licensure under the law.

Second, we are allowed to practice autonomously. While insurance plans may seem to try, no one outside of dentistry tells us how to practice. Of course, some laws may appear to be written to constrain dentistry; however, their purpose is to, for the public good, ensure that we practice within a Standard of Care and our Scope of Practice. Fortunately,

these two concepts are defined by our profession.

Third, in exchange for our autonomy, we have an obligation to be competent and trustworthy. As Dr. G. V. Black wrote, “Every professional person has no right to be other than a continuous student.” This implies a “social contract”. If the public is to trust us, we must be trustworthy. Should we, as a profession, misbehave and lose that trust, legislators and lawyers may choose, for the public good, to write more restrictive rules.

Fourth, “professionals create a structure for themselves in the form of professional organizations such as the American Dental Association” to provide a formal platform to set standards and ensure that members are trustworthy and to safeguard the profession in the public interest. They also provide codes of conduct and set standards for continuing education.

Fifth, at times, dentists must be willing to make sacrifices of their personal interests in order to serve their patients properly and accept these greater-than-normal risks.

- 1. Health Risk:** Denying patient care due to the patient’s infectious disease would be considered unprofessional except in rare cases.
- 2. Legal Risk:** Every patient encounter carries the risk of malpractice litigation.
- 3. Financial Risk:** The business of dentistry is unique from other forms of commercial enterprise. We have duties to our patients that can be somewhat independent of their financial status. Their health and well-

being come first. Money, while important, is secondary.

4. **Inconvenience and Personal Discomfort:** Patient's needs can occur at any time and are not isolated to normal business hours. "Dentistry is physically, emotionally and mentally challenging" and often takes a toll on the dentist's body.
5. **Levels of Uncooperative Patient Behavior:** Many patients are lovely people who manifest their anxiety and fear of dentistry with poor behavior.

The authors summarize this chapter with a brief discussion of a few qualities that true professionals can be counted on to share. Professionals have mastered their skills and continue to sharpen and develop those skills throughout their careers. Professionals possess a service orientation. They focus primarily on the service they can provide to the public, and they tend to make a good living by doing so. Professionals manage their own behavior and the behavior of fellow practitioners on behalf of the public. Professionals refrain from taking advantage of their status and do not hustle the public or make false claims.

Professionals remain fully present when interacting with patients and do not allow themselves to be distracted.

While this section was only a small part, I found the whole "Dental Ethics Primer" to be an informative and easy-to-understand handbook and can recommend it to anyone seeking to better understand the subject of ethics.

Editor's Note: Dr. Chamberlain, a VDA member, serves on the staff of the Appalachian Highlands Community Dental Center in Abingdon.

