



### **Ethics and professionalism are important parts of our practice in dentistry**

Dentistry, like many other professions, has multiple “Codes of Ethics” for its members to follow. We talk of ethical behavior and read about ethical misconduct, but what exactly are ethics? Are they innate? Can they be learned? Are they a choice? Are they a habit?

Ethics is the study of what is right and wrong. It is the process involved in determining the most morally desirable course of action when confronted with a situation where a decision is required.

Ethical behavior may, to some extent, be innate. Just as our intelligence and personality has a genetic component, so may the characteristics that make some people choose to act ethically or unethically. Some individuals seem to have this innate sense, which may be a more reliable means of distinguishing between right and wrong rather than relying on any written “Code of Ethics”.

Many factors influence one’s ethical behavior. Some of these are: parental and family values, religious and cultural background, important figures in one’s upbringing, schooling and education, peers and colleagues, and the media. Everyone’s collection of past experiences contributes to their own ethical reflection, a strong driving force in how they make ethical decisions.

For dentists, there are additional factors influencing one’s ethical behavior beginning in dental college and upon entering practice. Compassion, integrity, and good relationships with their patients were attributes most valued in role models.

Not only is there value in teaching ethics, it is a must. To get a driver’s license you must first pass a test setting out the “Rules of the Road.” Similarly, before graduating and being licensed to practice dentistry, it is necessary for dental students to learn and be tested on the technical aspects of procedures they can perform and to be informed about professional codes of conduct, also known as a “Code of Ethics.”

Emile Durkheim says that “habits are the real forces which govern us.... and as they acquire force; they are transformed into rules of conduct.”

Courses teaching ethics and professionalism starting in first year and reinforced often throughout their attendance at the dental school support and inspire excellent ethical behavior and strengthen self-reflection and moral reasoning. These are essential for the wellbeing of individual students, the dental profession as a whole and the patients we serve.

The Golden Rule, ‘treat others as you want to be treated’, be honest, don’t steal, cheat or lie are fundamental to and the basis for ethical and professional conduct. Ultimately it is the person’s own choice to follow what they have been taught, choose to be ethical and to value ethical decision making.

Whether ethics are innate, learned, by choice or habit is open to debate. However it should be widely agreed that regardless of how they are obtained, it is critically important that dental surgeons should aspire to acquire the skills necessary to identify, develop and internalize appropriate morals which will lead to a more ethical profession and practice of dentistry.

The future of dentistry is in the hands of our graduating dental students and providing them with a sound ethical and professional basis for practicing dentistry is in the best interests of the students, dentists, the profession and the public we serve.

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