

Policy on the Ethical Responsibility to Treat or Refer

Originating Council

Council on Clinical Affairs

Review Council

Council on Clinical Affairs

Adopted

2003

Reaffirmed

2008

Purpose

The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD) believes that all infants, children, adolescents, and individuals with special health care needs are entitled to oral health care that meets the treatment and ethical standards set by our specialty. If a dentist is unable to provide or fails to offer treatment for a diagnosed dental disease or condition, he or she has an ethical responsibility to refer the patient to a specific practitioner capable of providing the necessary care.

Methods

Documents relating to principles of ethics of dental and medical organizations were reviewed. A MEDLINE search using the terms “ethics” and “dentistry” was performed. Experts on dental and medical ethics were consulted.

Background

Dentists have an obligation to act in an ethical manner in the care of patients. Commonly accepted virtues of ethics include autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and justice.^{1,2} Autonomy reflects the patient’s or, if the patient is a minor, the parent’s or guardian’s right to be involved in treatment decisions. The caregiver must be informed of the problem and that treatment is recommended. Beneficence indicates the dentist has the obligation to act for the benefit of the patient in a timely manner, even when there may be conflicts with the dentist’s personal self interests. Nonmaleficence dictates that the dentist’s care does not result in harm to the patient. In situations where a dentist is not able to meet the patient’s needs, referral to a practitioner capable of providing the needed care is indicated. Justice expresses that the dentist should deal fairly with patients, colleagues, and the public.

A patient may suffer progression of his/her oral disease if treatment is not provided because of age, behavior, inability to cooperate, disability, or medical status. Postponement or denial of care can result in unnecessary pain, discomfort, increased treatment needs and costs, unfavorable treatment experiences, and diminished oral health outcomes.

Policy statement

Infants, children, and adolescents, including those with special health care needs, have a right to dental care. The AAPD believes it is unethical for a dentist to ignore a disease or condition because of the patient’s age, behavior, or disabilities. Dentists have an ethical obligation to provide therapy for patients with oral disease or refer for treatment patients whose needs are beyond the skills of the practitioner.

References

1. American Dental Association. Principles of Ethics and Code of Professional Conduct. With official advisory opinions revised to January 2005. Available at: “<http://www.ada.org/prof/prac/law/code/index.asp>”. Accessed July 15, 2007.
2. American College of Dentists. Ethics Handbook for Dentists. An Introduction to Ethics, Professionalism, and Ethical Decision Making. Gaithersburg, Md: American College of Dentists; 2004.