



What Kind of Dentist Do You Want to Be?

What kind of dentist do you want to be? During a recent seminar, I posed that question to my students. The ensuing discussion covered many topics, including that of ethics in dental practice. In the past, courses in ethics and practice management emphasized issues of advertising and the size and location of a sign outside one's office. Now such courses involve issues of patient management and the adequacy of patient treatment. As I thought about that ethics discussion, I realized that most people want to do the right thing, and that most dentists strive to be upstanding citizens with ethical practices. Yet a few do not, although they might rationalize the inadequate behaviors in their practice.

Periodically, a State Board of Dentistry circulates a report of its disciplinary actions. It always disappoints me to see how and why practitioners are disciplined. The most recent report listed the following: individuals who had practiced outside the standard of care for treatment; dentists who had offices with unsatisfactory cleanliness and infection control; those who had offices with inadequate patient records; persons who had committed insurance fraud by filing false insurance claims; and practitioners who treated their patients before having an adequate examination, diagnosis or plan of treatment. Overall, relatively few individuals were cited, but as I read over the list, I wondered what kind of dentist those practitioners had wanted to be, and whether they had rationalized their behaviors so that they thought they had done nothing wrong. I pondered what role our profession should take in response to such practitioners. The American Dental Association Principles of Ethics and Code of Professional Conduct states: "The dental profession has a special position within society. As a consequence society affords certain privileges that are not available to members of the public-at-large. In return, the profession makes a commitment to society that its members will adhere to high ethical standards of conduct." In its summer 2002 issue, *The Journal of the American College of Dentists* established a new

separate section "Issues in Dental Ethics." The section is sponsored by PEDNET, the Professional Ethics in Dentistry Network, "to communicate about important ethical issues in public." In the latest issue, there is an excellent paper, "Integrity and Compromise in Dental Ethics," (2003; 70(2):25-30) in which the author asks, "How is it possible for oral health care professionals to maintain integrity and still engage in...compromise on matters of professional and ethical significance?"

At a recent professional meeting, treatment that constituted improper care of children was addressed. It was reported that because reimbursement rates are low, some young children are being treated inappropriately by their dentists. They are wrapped in a restraint so that in one visit, complete treatment involving extensive care to all four quadrants could be performed without sedation. To save time, stainless steel crowns were placed, rather than time consuming alternatives, on both posterior and anterior teeth. While there could be rare special circumstances influencing this type of care, it was unanimously agreed that it was untenable to accept as routine the type of treatment described when the justification was economic. When the discussion mentioned those few dentists who engaged in this type of practice, I wondered what kind of dentist they wanted to be, and whether they rationalized their behavior so that they thought they were performing good services for their patients.

Ethical issues are not easy to evaluate. They do not typically manifest themselves in neat categories of black and white, but more often as many shades of gray. Perhaps the best way to determine if the line of unethical behavior has been crossed is to ask if you would want to be treated in a like fashion. If that were your child, would you want he/she to be treated in that particular way. I believe that most practitioners are ethical and caring individuals who would treat children as if they were their own. However, for those who would not, it is time for them to pause and reflect on what they do.

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