

Our Next Generation: Dental Student Ethics and its Potential Influence on the Profession

ALVIN ROSENBLUM, DDS

AUTHOR

Alvin Rosenblum, DDS, taught Clinical Dentistry at Ostrow School of Dentistry of the University of Southern California. His major emphasis has been teaching applied professional ethics. In 1994, Dr. Rosenblum was awarded the Distinguished Service Award in Ethics by the California Dental Association.
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The most important human endeavor is striving for morality in actions. Our inner balance and even our very existence depend on it. Only morality in our actions can give beauty and dignity in life. — Albert Einstein

In virtually any gathering of practicing dentists, you are likely to hear about the perceived failures of ethics in the profession. Often it faults the most recent generations of dentists. “They’ve lost their moral compass.” “Look at all the cheating that occurs in dental schools.” “They don’t have the same commitment to professionalism that has existed in the past.” “It’s advertising, competition and commercialism that are ruining our profession.” So it’s said.

In other conversations among our peers, you might hear thoughts about how corporate dentistry is a plague destined to crowd out the solo practitioner and the small, dentist-owned practices. You might hear how the trend to train “mid-level” care providers will further impact what has historically been called “private practice.” You also might hear how so-called cosmetic dentistry is being promoted for financial gain and is questionably applied for the benefit of the dentist rather than

in the patients’ best interests. Again, much of the concern about perceived ethical shortcomings and the accusations are directed to a generation other than the speaker’s own. It is always “they” who are creating the problems.

Those concerns and others, coupled with a study reported in the August 2007 issue of the *Journal of Dental Education* by Andrews et al., in which 1,153 dental students were surveyed regarding academic integrity, showed that 74.7 percent of students admitted to some level of cheating. This report, and accounts of students forging faculty signatures, performing unnecessary procedures in order to complete requirements, and of institutions taking monetary contributions to accept students into specialty programs, among other issues, was reported in *White Paper on Ethics and Professionalism in Dental Education*¹ by the American Students Dental Association (ASDA), which stated that “immediate action must be taken.” The students were concerned about the same problems and the same issues that their seniors in the profession lament.

The intention of this article is to share with you how today’s students, faced with a rapidly changing environment

that impacts the behavior of many in the profession, are responding to the perceived problems in the profession and to the ASDA *White Paper's* call for "immediate action." This article will illustrate how young people in our profession are working to learn about, and help teach, the discipline of ethics and ethical decision-making so that all in dentistry are on the same page and speaking the same language regarding professionalism. Dental students recognize that it is not only their peers but also the more established dentists who have demonstrated their share of violations of the tenets of ethics.

So, whatever our thinking is about the issues, is it the "ethics," the lack of moral character of more individuals in our profession that creates what we perceive as unprofessional behavior? Or, is it perhaps primarily systems and circumstances that create trends that affect individuals who are in fact just like us, basically good people? And, do those trends and circumstances, and the perceived decline in ethics, affect all segments of our profession, and not disproportionately the later generations as some argue?

I believe that most of the people who become dentists are essentially good people. Are there some bad actors? Of course, there always have been. In the opinion of the author, those who enter dental school today are, in character, very much the same as those who entered all during the second half of the 20th century. In my class in the early 1960s, we had a few who were not trustworthy, and just as few who were impeccable with regard to their behavior. For the most part, we were young adults who abided by most, and I emphasize most, of the rules. I believe it is the same today.

The circumstances today, however, are profoundly different. And, it is to a



FIGURE 1. The founding students and mentor of the Student Professionalism and Ethics Club. Back row: Sunjay Lad, Alvin Rosenblum, Michael Meru, Serge Lokot, Bryan Stimmler. Front row: Ray Klein, Alon Dori, Nicola Malik, Vicki Nguyen, Tracy D'Antonio, Nathan Coughlin. Not pictured: Dawn Jarocki, Anahita Taraporewalla, Joseph Field, Willie Waite.

great extent a reaction to those changing circumstances that have contributed to an apparent increase in the frequency of ethics failing in our profession. Dentists with experience and those new to the profession today are facing changes that are in some cases unique and in other cases the result of existent problems that are becoming more profound. The economy of dentistry has changed dramatically. There is an increasing need for capital in practices because of extremely expensive technology and the increased complexity of running a business. There has been a relatively rapid increase in the sale prices of dental practices. Student debt² and a dearth of employment opportunities impact many new graduates. Those conditions, along with numerous other elements, are driving the profession in new directions.

Dental students graduating over these past few years have been aware of the challenges facing the profession and some have made a commitment to address those difficulties, perhaps in new ways. The following is a brief history of a dental student-driven movement across the country that bodes well for our profession's future and the ability of our profession to adapt to changing times without sacrificing our values and our principles.

The History of Student Professionalism and Ethics Association (SPEA)³

In March 2009, a small group of students at the Ostrow School of Dentistry of the University of Southern California approached the author to discuss those ethics issues that were occurring in the profession and in their school environment. Issues like those mentioned in the introduction of this article (**FIGURE 1**). The students were looking for a way to become more proactive in promoting ethics not only in their school setting but also in the profession in general.

Those few students were advised to invite like-minded students to participate in a series of brainstorming sessions during which it was suggested that they start an ethics club. Because those students were being educated in a problem-based learning (PBL) environment, they were encouraged to develop their organization based on PBL principles, namely having it be student initiated, student centered and that they be committed to their long-term independence and lifelong learning about ethics. They started the club and called it the Student Professionalism and Ethics Club or SPEC.

The students met and developed a mission statement in which the stated

purpose of the organization was to increase the overall level of ethics and professionalism at the Ostrow School of Dentistry. The intent was to unite the community of students, faculty and staff in order to promote lifelong thought and action in dental ethics. Their aim was to foster an environment where ethics and professional behavioral issues could be addressed in an open, unbiased forum and further the ethics education of every student in a way that would support and guide students throughout their professional careers.

The students were eager to learn about the discipline of ethics and about ethical decision-making. They decided to hold monthly gatherings to discuss the field of ethics as it relates to dentistry, asking questions and sharing ideas. They invited notable guests, knowledgeable in the discipline of ethics, to speak to and interact with the SPEC students. At their first monthly meeting, there were about 100 attendees.

As time passed and more of the students became knowledgeable in the discipline of ethics and they developed a better understanding of professionalism, they participated in the ethics orientation of each subsequent entering class, providing early exposure to this vital subject for the new students. By 2008, the fledgling organization had gained recognition from the American Society for Dental Ethics⁴, the American College of Dentists⁵ and the American Dental Association.

In 2009, ASDA passed a resolution and the ADA offered support through its Committee on Ethics, Bylaws and Judicial Affairs and its Joint Subcommittee on Ethics in Education. The students at USC had detailed their developmental process and created a “startup kit” for use by other dental schools and institutions in order for them to begin what was

then being called SPEC Chapters. In the December 2009 edition of the *ADA News*, a report told of dental students who had been, and were becoming more of a “driving force” behind a resurgence in ethics and professionalism. That resurgence continues to this day.⁶

National Organizational Development

How did SPEC students come to the conclusion that ethics is a student concern? When asked that question Michael Meru, DDS, a founding member of the Alpha Chapter when he was a student at Ostrow, offered the following:

“I think the answer to this is twofold. First, upon entering dental school I don’t think the founding students completely understood the fine line that we as dentists walk between being health care providers and business people. And as graduation grew closer, there was a desire to have more specific guidance and a forum where our questions and concerns could be addressed because we knew that after graduation we would be faced with decisions where ethics and patient care would come into

play. Second, we saw actual ethical breaches happening in dental schools across the country, as well as in our own dental school, and we wanted to do whatever we could to stop these issues.”

SPEC at Ostrow formed a national committee, composed of nine students from Indiana University, Midwestern University, University of the Pacific, University of California, Los Angeles, University of Southern California, and Virginia Commonwealth University, who were tasked with paving the way for SPEC to become a national organization. This committee met in 2010 and had several specific goals. They committed to draft a constitution and bylaws for the organization, to brainstorm the leadership structure at the national, regional and local levels, to begin formulating a strategic plan for the organization, to plan the 2011 inaugural annual session in Las Vegas and to identify the best ways to get involvement from as many dental students as possible. Those goals were discussed, modified and ratified by the attendees at the inaugural annual session. After which time, elections took



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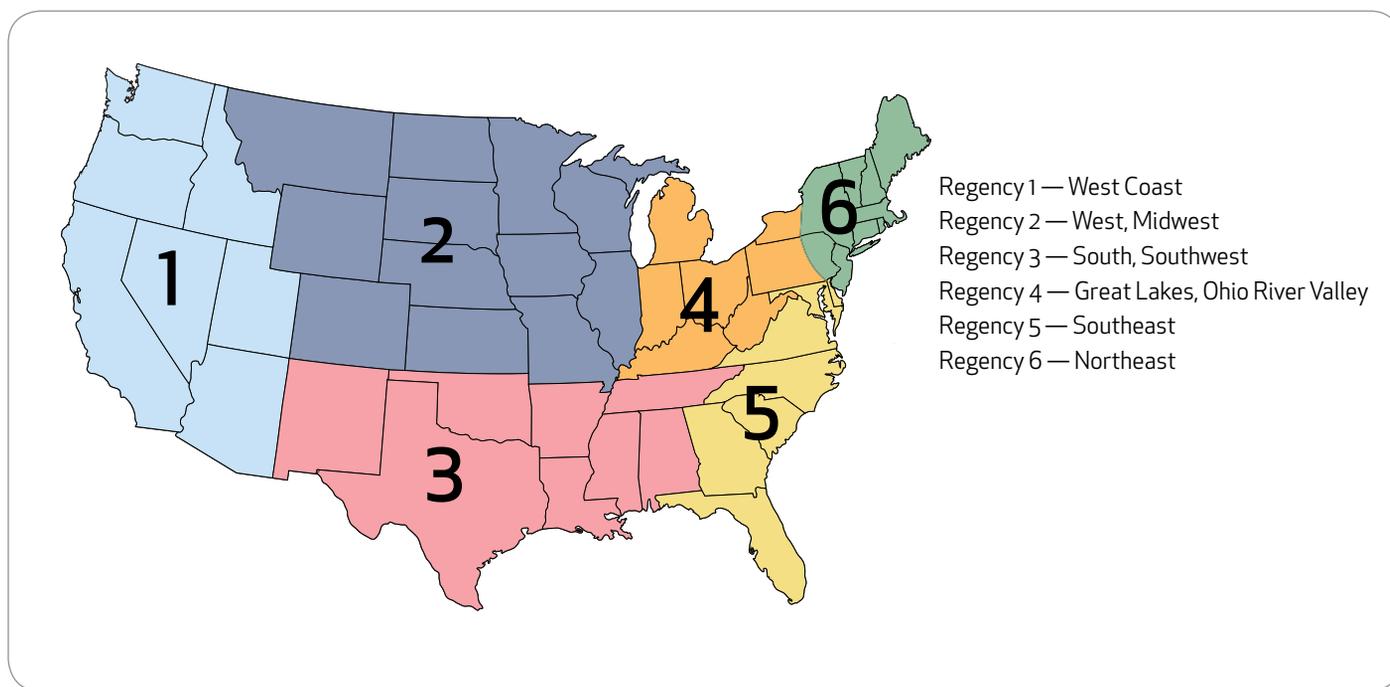


FIGURE 2. Student Professionalism and Ethics Association membership regencies.

place and the leadership ranks were filled with students from around the country.

So in 2011, what was SPEC became SPEA, the Student Professionalism and Ethics Association⁷, with chapters in more than half of the U.S. dental schools. This still-growing organization held its second annual national meeting in conjunction with the annual meetings of both the ADA and the American College of Dentists in San Francisco in October 2012. At the convocation of the American College of Dentists, SPEA received the prestigious Ethics and Professionalism Award. What began as a small group of concerned students who were interested in informing their peers about ethics has grown into a recognized national movement that is likely to impact the entire profession.²

The students have created a structure modeled after the American College of Dentists. They have grouped the states into six geographic regions based upon the location of the dental schools within the states. Each regency (**FIGURE 2**) has representation in the national leadership

and contributes representatives to the national meetings. In the short time since its inception, SPEA has become a national leader in ethics in U.S. dental schools and is making inroads in Canada and Latin America.

SPEA Activities

The SPEA groups at the individual dental schools are discussing and debating the many issues that they see as having ethics components. Their issues parallel those faced by practicing dentists such as health care reform, barriers to care and the development of mid-level providers. As are their elders in the profession, they too are concerned about the use of live patients in licensing exams, inappropriate use of social media and increased commercialization of the profession.

Their concerns that are unique to the dental school setting include interest rates of student loans, high debt incurred during dental school, patient-specific issues such as trading patients, violations of appropriate record protocol and the numbers-based curriculum rather

than one based on competency. There is of course concern about any form of cheating or plagiarism. They are also concerned about by what criteria specialty programs will be selecting candidates now that the National Board Examination is assessed on a pass/fail basis.

Each SPEA chapter is different and is allowed to hold activities as it sees fit. Most have regular meetings with presentations by both students and faculty on issues the school is facing. SPEA students are studying the discipline of ethics and are inviting guest speakers to address topics in the context of that discipline. They have had guests from most of the major organizations within dentistry, ethicists, authors, psychologists and practicing dentists and have convened panels to explore varying points of view.

SPEA as a national entity is planning a charitable event to support veterans of military service. That first event will most likely be held summer 2014.

It seems that the pressures felt by both dental students and dentists alike have increased over time. It also seems

that the changing circumstances have a different effect on different segments of our profession. Challenges in our present economy, and the increasing competitiveness and commercialization of dentistry along with ever increasing cost of education and practice startup are contributory to choices about where and how to practice. Over the last decade, rising student debt has had an impact on some young dentists' selection of a practice model. That, along with infusions of venture capital, seems to be fueling the growth of corporate practices.

An unpublished survey of students⁸ indicates that they overwhelmingly prefer the private practice model. They rate private practice, military and public health practices highest in 10 categories ranging from ability to provide quality care to providing the most professional satisfaction. In the same survey, corporate practice rated highest only in availability of employment opportunities following graduation from dental school.

Advances in dental education have been many, well meaning and constructive. Nevertheless, there have been historical impediments to accepting the teaching of applied ethics. Many dental school programs that are labeled as "ethics" are little more than case "show-and-tell" by dentists untrained in the discipline of ethics. In many cases, the courses are little more than "risk management" with elements of law. Most ethics teaching in dental schools is by faculty who have other major obligations. Ethics is relegated to catch-as-catch-can by well-meaning teachers who have other primary responsibilities or by part-time faculty with inadequate support.

There has been a serious effort known as the Professional Ethics Initiative, or PEI, led by the American College of Dentists and the American Society for Dental Ethics to create a variety of ethics education programs.

The hope is that these programs will improve the quality of ethics educators and ultimately, the effectiveness of ethics courses in our dental schools.

It seems clear that in order to relieve the angst evident within the profession, we must improve the ability of individuals to cope with the pressures and demands that can potentially lead them to violate their own values and the values of the profession. SPEA, a growing movement among students of dentistry, with the support of their elder colleagues, seems poised to take on the challenge of maintaining professionalism while adjusting to whatever challenges face our profession. ■■■■

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THE AUTHOR, Alvin Rosenblum, DDS, can be reached at rosenblu@usc.edu.

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