

# Dental Ethics: Professional Challenges in a Changing World

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## GUEST EDITOR

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It seems everywhere I go these days I hear a conversation about “ethics.” The subject comes up in relation to business, politics, sports, education, health care and more. Nearly all human interaction requires the use of ethical decision-making. All of this talk is a fine thing, but when you ask people what ethics means and how you make ethical decisions, you are likely to get a blank stare or a vague answer. We talk about it a lot but do not really have a working knowledge of the subject.

Ethics in dentistry is a hot topic. There are courses offered at major meetings and letters to the editor bemoaning the need for improved ethical standards throughout our profession. Much of the chatter focuses on marketing, consultants and corporate investment in dentistry. There is certainly nothing inherently unethical about any of these; however, there can be a certain dissonance between the business of dentistry and the provision of health care to our patients.

The challenge to dental professionals

is to balance business and oral health care in an ethical way. In order to be ethical, we must first understand what that means and how one makes ethical decisions. We will need to look at the challenges that confront the profession and consider ways to evaluate the situations before arriving at an ethical decision.

This collection of articles will provide ideas and a common language to facilitate a conversation about some of the pressing challenges facing the dental profession today.

In his essay, “Would Someone Please Explain What It Means to Be Ethical?” David Chambers, PhD, provides a foundation for our conversation on ethics. He discusses the philosophical and principles-based theories of ethics and the confusion that afflicts many of us regarding what it means to be ethical. Of particular significance, he defines how ethics differs from morality and how ethical reasoning can result in the common good we seek as professionals.

Of great interest to the profession of dentistry in the digital age is the

convergence of social media and dental practice. Bruce Peltier, PhD, MBA along with colleague Arthur Curley, JD, examines the potential advantages and pitfalls of social media and dental practice marketing in “The Ethics of Social Media in Dental Practice: Challenges.” There is unease within the profession rooted in rapidly changing expectations of patients and practitioners regarding appropriate use of social media in the promotion of a dental practice. How we meet this challenge may well define our profession in the future. In a second offering, “The Ethics of Social Media in Dental Practice: Ethical Tools and Professional

Responses,” the authors present tools to guide ethical decision-making and discuss ethical challenges in the current practice environment. To assist the practitioner in balancing marketing and professional obligations, a checklist on making ethical marketing decisions is included at the end of this essay.

In the day-to-day management of their practice, dentists face many of the same stresses, as does the proprietor of any other business. Yet as professionals, our obligation to our patients requires a more beneficent posture than the profit motive of a retail shop. Phyllis L. Beemsterboer, MS, EdD, FACD,

and co-author Gary T. Chiodo, DMD, FACD, contrast the dental professional’s obligation to the patient with the business of dentistry in “Care Versus Commerce: A Challenge to Professional Integrity?” They argue that maintaining dentistry’s long-standing integrity must be the responsibility of each dentist, as well as the profession.

As the result of lapses in judgment in professional schools and out of concern for their newly chosen profession, dental students throughout the country have founded an organization for nurturing professionalism, Student Professional Ethics Association (SPEA). Alvin Rosenblum, DDS, considers the genesis and progress of this movement as students seek to define what it means to be ethical and professional in school, as well as, in future practice in “Our Next Generation: Dental Student Ethics and Its Potential Influence on the Profession.”

The CDA Code of Ethics is often cited, but not well understood. In “CDA Judicial Council: Blending Idealism and Practicality,” Robert D. Kiger, DDS, demystifies the “Council” and the application of the “Code.” From process to intent, there is much to know about how and why we list Peer Review and the Code as member benefits. Enhanced understanding of this aspect of CDA will help keep our members and profession among the most trusted in the country.

Finally, in Perspective, we present the message delivered to first-year dental students by Arthur A. Dugoni, DDS, MSD. In “Road Signs on the Road of Life” you will find, taken from his detailed notes, his thoughts on what it means to be a dentist and a professional. It is also a reminder of how our predecessors, committed to ethics, science and service, moved dentistry from trade to profession. ■■■■■

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