

Perspectives

JUDGING ETHICS ETHICALLY

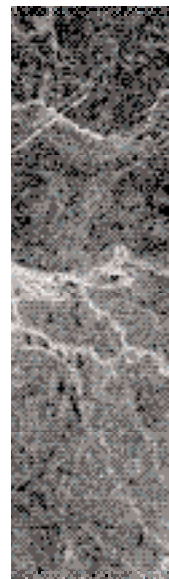
Over the last year or two there have appeared in this column and elsewhere, editorials and opinions condemning what has been perceived as aggressive overtreatment of unsuspecting patients having cosmetic improvements or reconstructive dentistry. The authors claim that the public is being victimized by unscrupulous dentists who are graduates of learning centers run by “self-appointed experts”(gurus). It is further implied that these greedy dentists, after taking a course at these unqualified, “high-profile” but unnamed institutes, perform what are judged to be unnecessary treatments carried out using unsound methods and techniques. These accusations are made by intelligent-thought leaders with good intent. After all, there is no doubt that maltreatment of the public does occur and should be condemned and addressed appropriately. However, in my opinion, it is sweepingly judgmental to indict these “misguided” institutes and all their graduates as “flooding the marketplace with poorly rendered veneers” leading to “premature replacement with crowns, endodontic treatment, and even implants” and further to assume the dentists have offered no

other choice to their helpless patients but to pay up for this extensive, expensive treatment. No question that we should passionately stick up for the public we treat, but it should be done with the ethics that these critics claim others lack.

Let us begin by looking at these condemnations practically. If masses of patients, who are spending the equivalent of a new car, are being hurt everyday and are suffering extensive failure, would not a significant number of these maltreated patients be highly vocal and their lawyers be all over these large numbers of institute graduates? At the very least, word would spread in the community and referrals would dry up. Also, would any dentist in our litigious society continue providing such visual and expensive treatment that constantly fails? Can a good living be made constantly recementing, rebonding, or retreating? In my experience, when dentists have a high failure rate doing something, they either stop doing it or learn how.

The judgments rendered in some editorials, and even now from podiums, are that these institutes and

their graduates lack skills and honesty, are unethical, and are downgrading our profession. These judges, dare I say self-appointed, point to articles in journals that appear to be overtreatment and sometimes report that they have seen cases in their offices where the treatment in their opinion was wrong, unnecessary, or poorly executed. I have to admit that I have seen published case reports by graduates, and even faculty, of what are considered “prestigious” institutes where indirect veneers were done in situations where I thought just some minor additive direct resin would have been far more conservative and less costly. But then, I did not have the knowledge of the examination or was privy to the treatment discussion that took place with the patient when the goals of treatment were set. Also, have not we all had patients come to us because they are dissatisfied with a previous dentist’s treatment? Or, perhaps during an examination



of a new patient, observed treatment rendered by a previous dentist we thought was of low quality or inappropriate? We all know that to bad-mouth dentistry and the dentist to the patient is unprofessional. We just do not have the information to make the judgment. We were not there for the diagnosis or when the treatment options were discussed and have no idea of the unique issues that had to be addressed, and perhaps overcome, when the treatment was rendered. Bad-mouthing the previous dentist without the facts is unethical, makes the dentist doing it look bad, and lowers the image of the whole profession in the eyes of the patient. We know that the professional thing to do is to call the previous dentist and discuss our concerns with an attitude toward understanding all the issues before making a judgment. Should not this professional, ethical approach apply when judging these nameless institutes of ill repute and their thousands of graduates?

Maybe the "critics" should call or meet with the course directors of these institutes they are maligning. Better yet, open-mindedly attend a course, objectively intent on seeing and hearing firsthand what is actually being taught, before making

such sweeping judgments. Finally, should an entire institute and all its graduates be judged as bad because some of its graduates practice less-than-competent dentistry or act unethically? By that reasoning, all centers of dental education, possibly including every dental school in the country, could not be judged ethical or competent.

In no way am I condoning unethical or bad treatment of patients. Nor do I believe that just because it has always occurred that we should accept it. Quite the contrary, the public has given us a license to treat them and we owe it to them to police ourselves. Fortunately, we have a significantly more educated and critical patient today. We also have a long-standing system of peer review, which, along with the legal system, addresses bad care on a case-by-case basis after gathering the facts in a fair, objective, and ethical manner.

Likewise, I agree that high standards in postgraduate education must be maintained. Both the Academy of General Dentistry and American Dental Association have structured protocols that must be met before giving continuing

education credits for sponsored courses and lectures. If a concern exists regarding the value of teaching or lecturing being offered, ethics and professionalism require the appropriate channels of redress be taken instead of publicly bashing and trashing. Is all this vocal animosity within our profession good for the profession? Does a destructive or mean-spirited approach ever accomplish anything other than increase conflict?

We only bring shame on ourselves and our profession by bad-mouthing each other and making sweeping judgments based on second-hand, incomplete information and hearsay. Let us not assume the worst in everyone. Instead, let us act professionally, at all times being respectful of each other, reject politics and personal agendas, and, above all, be fair. In short, judge ethics, ethically.

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