

Editorial

Ethics and the Hidden Curriculum

Over the years since I was in dental school, various polls have been published in which Americans ranked professions according to their perceptions of the professions' honesty, integrity, and ethics. For many years, dentistry was at or near the top of the list. In recent years, however, our profession has slipped a bit in the eyes of the public. The most recent Gallup poll, conducted in late 2006, puts dentists fifth on the list, behind (in order) nurses, pharmacists, veterinarians, and physicians. All of those are worthy professions, to be sure, but why has dentistry dropped? Does the public believe that our ethics are in need of some improvement?

It may well, given the recent cheating scandals that have taken place in several dental schools around the country. These episodes have involved not just a few students, but in some cases many students in a class. Dentistry is not alone—cheating at other professional schools has made headlines, and those may be just the tip of the ethics iceberg.

While there may be generational differences in learning styles and attitudes toward one's life's work, it seems unreasonable to assume that today's recent college graduates are any less ethical than previous generations. It seems more likely that dental schools are somehow failing to instill the profession's ethics into their students. Every dental school must ensure that its graduates are competent in applying ethical concepts in patient care and practice management. Exactly how to test for these competencies is problematic, and obviously some students have not been fully inculcated with those principles. Ethics is taught as much by what we

do as by what we say to our students. Dental school faculty—including practitioners who teach part-time—should take every opportunity to address with students potential ethical conflicts that could arise when caring for patients, and the students should be engaged in conversations about right and wrong. Much has been made of this "hidden curriculum" in dental education—the out-of-classroom experiences that promote enculturation of the profession. Within the hidden curriculum, students should be developing their understanding of the profession and adopting their identities within that framework, including the development of their sense of ethics. Too often the hidden curriculum includes learning how to beat the system of professional education, how to bend the rules and take shortcuts. On the positive side, many students will have the opportunity to explore the hidden curriculum through extramural and extracurricular activities, including exposure to community clinics and private practices. They will observe how we, as practitioners and educators, care for patients with special needs, the underprivileged, and others less fortunate than ourselves. How we conduct our professional lives will have a great impact. We should take these opportunities to teach our younger colleagues the qualities that separate a profession from a trade. Those of us who come into contact with residents in our specialty programs should likewise serve as educators in the hidden pediatric dentistry curriculum by teaching "do what I say, AND do what I do."


Editor-in-Chief

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