

DEBATE



A Question of Ethics

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With talk about ethics becoming so popular, a look at the precise meaning of this word is in order. For many people it brings to mind a code of ethics, a set of laws and principles that professionals must observe in the course of their work.

Defined as the "science of morals, moral principles, rules of conduct" (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary*), the word "ethics" has to do with human actions and presupposes a set of rules for proper conduct. It can be considered another way, in terms of form rather than content. This is how concepts like duty, moral obligation, responsibility and moral judgment arise. From this perspective, ethics relates to an ability to think critically, one that limits our freedom to act.

Clearly, issues like euthanasia, assisted suicide and reproduction, and genetics are more likely to create controversy and make the headlines than any ethical matters pertaining to dentistry. Professional ethics are an integral feature of our society, however, and sometimes date back many years (as in the case of the Hippocratic Oath taken by physicians). In Quebec, this tradition was built upon in 1974, when the regulatory authorities (orders) were established, and

in 1994, when codes of ethics in health care and social services became compulsory — later becoming the norm for a variety of industries and organizations. Today, the pursuit of total quality, with its emphasis on the client above all else, also has an ethical basis.

However, with the proliferation of these codes arise questions such as the following: Is respect for others more apparent in our society? Do dentists put the welfare of their patients before their own personal gain? Lastly, is their attitude potentially harmful to their colleagues?

To answer these questions, we can draw a parallel with ethics in journalism. Many of us felt that such ethics were noticeably lacking in last fall's television broadcast *La facture*. In this program, one of our colleagues was attacked despite being unable to defend himself. It was clear that the same thing could happen to any of us and that the journalist's assumptions could have consequences long before any legal decision was reached. Perhaps he should have waited until the case went to court before going on the offensive.

It was alarming to see the treatment of this case, in which a dentist was accused of causing paresthesia of the lingual nerve during a

surgical extraction. Without wishing to get into the legal issues, we may still express an opinion on the ethics demonstrated by this journalist.

First, the dentist was not in a position to respond to the accusations against him, because his insurer threatened to stop representing him in court if he spoke up. Despite the obvious lack of balance, the journalist allowed the plaintiff to talk freely, thereby presenting only one side of the story. The journalist also implied that the dentist was "hiding" behind his insurer's letter to avoid talking.

Second, since the Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean region consists of a string of tiny municipalities, dentists in the area often serve small communities. It is easier to lose one's reputation than it is in a large city where anonymity rules. Through his disregard for this fact, the journalist could easily have ruined years of hard work in a matter of minutes. Fortunately, the public took all the circumstances into account.

What conclusions can we draw from this example in terms of a breach of ethics? First, considerable harm can be done to an honest person with little benefit to

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The devolution of responsibilities to parodontal workers, originally projected by public health gurus as a panacea for affordable treatment delivery in publicly funded oral health systems, has had a devastating effect on the profitability of dental practices. Hygienists have mostly ended up in private practices while denturists thrive in providing mechanical solutions to biological problems on their own, autonomous premises. As mundane as basic oral hygiene procedures are, it may not make economic sense to pay someone else to perform them in a stringent marketplace. As for the capitulation of dentistry in allowing dental mechanics to rehabilitate the edentulous and partially edentulous population, let's not forget that provincial associations merely acquiesced to their governments quest for "competition" in health care delivery (read, "cheaper dentures"!). With regard to the high cost of dental treatment, we should ask ourselves why employers are expected to partially fund our patients' dental treatment. We may be conveniently ignoring the fact that if our fees are beyond the financial reach of the majority of the working population, then maybe they are too high.

It is unlikely that dental faculties welcome an incorporation with medical faculties because, as Dr. Deslauriers points out, they suffer a loss of autonomy and prestige. Although an exciting prospect, total amalgamation is unlikely to occur unless the concept of a dentist as a non-medical practitioner is replaced with that of a stomatologist — a physician who has completed a basic medical course and then specialized in oral health. Would we then all be specialists? Would our treatment costs increase as a result? Would the public be any better informed about the range of our capabilities? Probably not. Patients would be in no better position to decide whether to see a general physician or an oral physician than they are now in having to decide between seeing a medical doctor or a dentist.

It appears that the conditions which cause dentists to search for solutions to our collective dilemmas are due, in part, to the lack of foresight and timely initiative on the part of our dental associations. If these organizations are seriously considering the issues that profoundly affect the average dentist, then we are rarely made aware of their efforts. They have been far too ready to accommodate governments and insurance companies, often at our expense. It may be time to request a more definitive response from the organizations that purport to represent our interests as to the future direction our profession is likely to pursue. ■

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the public. Second, the reputation of an entire profession can be tarnished through what I see as one journalist talking indiscriminately.

When one of us is on trial, a part of each of us is also on trial. We share values, not sanctions. So let's stick together and make every effort to avoid damaging our colleagues' names. ■

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