

# The Ethical Implications of Patient Rewards

Barry Schwartz, DDS, MHSc (bioethics)

## Contact Author

Dr. Schwartz  
Email: [barry.schwartz@schulich.uwo.ca](mailto:barry.schwartz@schulich.uwo.ca)



© J Can Dent Assoc 2006; 72(7):631–3  
This article has been peer reviewed.

June arrives at her dental appointment and Dr. Jones rushes in immediately so as not to keep her waiting. “Welcome June!” he announces on entering the treatment room, as he smiles broadly. “Thank you for referring your new neighbours. You are one of my best referrers. I have credited your account \$25 for each of the 4 new patients, like always. You have a hefty credit now.” “Thank you, doctor,” June replies, “I think that I may be able to get those veneers done by next year. This is such a good program, better even than air miles. I also appreciate that you never keep me waiting!”

With many dental offices actively seeking new patients to replace the normal attrition of existing patients, many dentists have engaged in both external marketing — advertising, bulk-mailed newsletters, etc. — and internal marketing methods, not only to retain current patients, but also to encourage them to refer their friends and families.

One form of internal marketing that has become increasingly popular in dental offices involves forging partnerships, through a form of loyalty rewards, with patients to expand the patient base. The above scenario exemplifies what appears on the surface to be a win-win situation for the dentist and the patient. However, it is my contention that a closer examination of the ethical issues involved is

necessary before we consider adopting such techniques. In this article, I look at this case through the ethical lenses of informed consent, conflict of interest, justice, philosophical theory and decision-making.

## Informed Consent: Deception

The first issue arising from this scenario is informed consent and the potential for deception. Do June’s neighbours know about the financial incentive she’s receiving and would it make a difference if they did? When trusting people share information, there is a natural assumption that this information transfer is altruistic in nature. To paraphrase Kant’s categorical imperative, “People should not have their individual freedoms compromised for some other end” — such as the betterment of the dentist described in this case or the referrer, or both. Kant also said that respecting a person’s capacity for self-determination is a way of expressing respect for his or her dignity as a morally autonomous individual.<sup>1</sup>

There are parallels to this sort of marketing. A recent *60 Minutes* edition informed the public about an increasingly popular marketing technique in business — hiring actors to go to bars and talk positively about some new product after befriending numerous strangers. In other scenarios, actors disguised as tourists ask strangers to take their picture with their new camera cell phone, then brag about the great features of the phone in the hopes of creating interest in that product.<sup>2</sup> According to Malcolm Gladwell in his book, *The Tipping Point*,<sup>3</sup> conventional advertising is

about trying to charm or persuade people, whereas this new type of advertising leans toward deceiving people as to what is actually going on. I see little ethical difference between paying patients to talk-up their dentist to friends, as in the above example, and hiring a stranger to do the same thing. When people discover that they have been deceived, trust goes out the door with them as they continue their search for a more honest dentist.

### **Conflict of Interest**

Even though the referring patient is already a satisfied patient of Dr. Jones, the fact that there is a financial incentive to bring in other patients creates a conflict of interest. Certainly a potential new patient might benefit by being one of Dr. Jones' patients, but so will the referrer by receiving free dentistry credits. It is possible that the patient will say to a friend or prospective patient, "Dr. Jones is the best dentist ever, and I get \$25 for each successful referral that I send him!" However, the last part of this statement would most likely be omitted, making the motive somewhat less transparent to the prospective patient.

### **Justice: Fairness**

Another consideration is whether Dr. Jones makes a concerted effort not to keep June waiting at the expense of other patients. It is commendable for Dr. Jones to be on time for every patient, albeit unlikely, since dental practice involves many unscheduled emergencies and treatment complications that can affect promptness. If, in fact, Dr. Jones makes other "less important" patients wait while he attends to a major source of referrals, then the issue of social justice and fairness comes into play. All patients deserve to be treated with equal respect for their time, irrespective of our personal opinions of them or the potential for personal gain that they represent.

### **Decision-Making**

Every professional and business decision requires careful consideration of one's personal values and also those of the profession, which dentists are obligated to uphold. Decision-making involves continually evaluating accepted norms and specific situations — what Rawls termed a "reflective equilibrium."<sup>4</sup> During this progression, one's beliefs and theories are being constantly revised. By basing judgements on a type of value-maximizing reflection, dentists are always assessing and reassessing their own values and the potential consequences of their actions.

"Consequences do matter," wrote John Stuart Mill in his consequentialist theories well over 140 years ago. Grounding our decisions in ethical principles and continuing an open dialogue with professional peers on these issues can help identify inconsistencies in moral

views from one situation to another. These principles have guided professional values very well over the last century.

Market pressures in dentistry have been cited by dentists as a rationalization for setting aside ethical principles.<sup>5</sup> Changes in professional direction in the form of advertising and marketing are being fueled by market pressures as a result of an overabundance of dentists congregating in urban areas. With more dentists competing for fewer patients and perhaps dentists' motives for undertaking dental procedures that are more profitable, dentists are being encouraged by practice management consultants to change their methods of attracting new patients.

### **The Effective Business Model?**

Consumers of all kinds have come to expect certain advantages in the course of business. Frequent flier miles, credit card rebates, hotel upgrades, etc., have created a climate in which consumers expect a reward for what they do. This trend has carried over to dentistry with the introduction of credit cards for payment and advertising by dental offices. Dentistry as a fee-for-service profession is both a business and a healing art.

Financial pressure is always a big motivator for change and, consequently, dentistry is evolving due to both technological advancements and escalating operating costs. Many effective business models are being adapted to dental practices without sufficient regard to the ethical and professional implications.

A recent article in an American business journal described the success of a Seattle dentist, who "went from nothing in 1998 to an office grossing \$1.5 million by the end of the third year."<sup>6</sup> He attributed this phenomenal growth in new patients and retention to the marketing strategy of offering complimentary whitening treatments to all his patients.

What appears to be a sound advertising model for this dentist fails to consider the negative repercussions on the profession as a whole and the essence of our responsibilities, as not every, or even very many, patients *need* teeth whitening. Important patient concerns, such as contraindications, an interactive decision-making model and adverse reactions (teeth sensitivity), become lost in the one-size-fits-all context of marketing.

### **Conclusions**

Before initiating a patient reward scheme, dentists should engage in considerable reflection on the ethical implications. When the need for change is applied to dentists' professional integrity and ethical values, immense financial rewards can be one of the consequences. However, public opinion of dentists, as dentistry moves from a healing art-centred profession to a business-centred one, may have serious long-term repercussions

— on both the profession and, ultimately, the individual — that may prove to be contrary to the dentist’s image and even his or her bottom line.

Ethics, as a function of what we *ought* to do, cannot be left out of business decisions that have a direct impact on professionalism. If they are omitted, the resulting short-term financial rewards may be heavily offset by the loss of patient trust in dentistry as a whole. ➤

## THE AUTHOR

*Dr. Schwartz is an adjunct professor in dental practice administration at the Schulich School of Medicine and Dentistry, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario.*

**Correspondence to:** Dr. Barry Schwartz, Dental Sciences Bldg. D0152, University of Western Ontario, London ON N6A 5C1.

*The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or official policies of the Canadian Dental Association.*

## References

1. Secker B. The appearance of Kant’s deontology in contemporary Kantianism: concepts of patient autonomy in bioethics. *J Med Philos* 1999; 24(1):43–66.
2. Undercover marketing uncovered. 60 Minutes, CBS News; July 25, 2004. Available from URL: [www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/10/23/60minutes/printable579657.shtml](http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/10/23/60minutes/printable579657.shtml) (accessed June 3, 2006).
3. Gladwell M. The tipping point: how little things can make a big difference. New York: Little Brown and Company; 2000.
4. Rawls J. A theory of justice. Cambridge: Harvard University Press; 1971.
5. Trofimuk J. Are courses in ethics worth the expense? *J Can Dent Assoc* 2004; 70(3):154–5.
6. Kramer A. Dentists say freebies, spa services help them compete. *Puget Sound Business Journal (Seattle)* 2003; 12 May. Available from URL: <http://seattle.bizjournals.com/seattle/stories/2003/05/12/focus3.html> (accessed June 3, 2006).

Got an opinion? Discuss this article in the CDA Members’ Forum at [www.cda-adc.ca/forum](http://www.cda-adc.ca/forum). Not sure how to log in? It’s as easy as...

1. Go to the Web address provided above
2. Type in your password
3. Choose a topic and start “chatting”.

Don’t know your password? Forgot your password?

Online instructions are provided to help you retrieve that information. Or contact CDA at 1-800-267-6354, between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. EDT, email: [reception@cda-adc.ca](mailto:reception@cda-adc.ca).