

It's all in the sequence: Professionalism II

In June we discussed the ethics^{1,2} subset of professionalism. This month our attention turns to the personal assessment necessary to live a professional life.

Self-assessment

Before deciding on treatment plans for specific patients, dentists must be able to gather and synthesize a variety of basic and clinical patient-related information in a critical, scientific, and effective manner. The ability to do this implies an honest self-assessment as one begins the sequential process of deciding what therapies to adopt for one's patients. Next it is necessary to decide if one has the didactic knowledge, the clinical skills, and the comprehensive patient-centered understanding to apply those therapies without consultation from colleagues. That's what lifelong learning, interdisciplinary comprehensive patient care, and continual self-assessment³ are all about. In summary, the basic questions of information gathering, management, and critical thinking are:

1. Do we know how to find the information, from any source, that is necessary for directing a contemporary dental practice?
2. Do we understand that today's information is tomorrow's history and that continual learning and reassessment are fundamental to a life of professional competency?
3. Can we combine our experience and our scientific knowledge into a comprehensive practice system that is able to manage the oral health care of our patients?
4. Are we able to assess our knowledge base so as to find our weak areas and either strengthen them or identify colleagues to whom we can refer for assistance?
5. Is our critical thinking^{3,4} effective enough to evaluate the validity of literature, products, claims, research, and techniques that come to our attention?
6. Can we then use that critical-thinking process to make appropriate *evidence-based* conclusions as to the validity of our clinical decisions?

All of this introductory thought is necessary, because in an information society of exponential knowledge growth, we must cope with huge increases in information in increasingly shorter times.

The need to review and understand logic and the scientific method has never been greater. The ability to ferret out quackery and the abuses of logic employed to justify suspect ideas is a valuable tool in deciding what therapies to offer our patients. Research strategies and their clinical applications should be reviewed as a regular part of our reading habit.

Understanding how measurements are carried out and evaluated is fundamental to critical thinking. The reliability, sensitivity, and specificity of various measures and tests must be familiar knowledge. Even after experimental design, statistical inference, and evidence-based conclusions are accepted, the ability to *apply* that knowledge across a wide spectrum of the practicing population is not a certainty. Fluoridation of public water supplies and dental sealants are cases in point.

There is an advantage to asking ourselves these sorts of questions. Answering them correctly insures that we will serve our patients well. That insures that both we and our patients will be satisfied with our relationship over a long period of time. That, in turn, insures a fulfilled and contented life as a respected professional. This provides good outcomes for everyone involved.

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References

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3. Brunette DM. Critical Thinking: Understanding and Evaluating Dental Research. Chicago: Quintessence, 1996.
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