

Dentistry's social responsibility: The persistent voice

Every society on earth that I know of honors its healers. In return those societies place demands on their healers, including the expectation of certain behaviors. This editorial addresses the relationship between dentists and our communities: what are our societal obligations?

The nature of a profession implies a group of individuals with special knowledge, bound by widely accepted and expected moral and ethical principles. "Moral" is an adjective denoting principles of right conduct according to social customs and habits; "ethical" is an adjective denoting principles of right behavior according to a process of disciplined, systematic thought about morals. In general, if an action has the characteristics of ultimacy, universality, neutralism, publicity, and ordering, it is considered by society to be both moral and ethical.¹ That is to say, the action is done at the highest standard, at the right time, for the right reasons, to the right persons, with full disclosure of all relevant circumstances.

Another way to denote professionalism is by the four basic attributes that set a group apart from the general society:² (1) members of that group possess a level of expertise that is both important to society and exclusive to the members of that profession; (2) the group has both an internal (peer) and external (public) structure to which they are accountable; (3) members possess autonomy in practice; and (4) members willingly accept a set of professional obligations.

Are you proud of what you and your office colleagues do every day? Are you willing to publicly proclaim what you do, for everybody in your community to look at and examine? Are we, the dental profession, doing all we can to promote right behavior, both by example and by overt persuasion? Think carefully about the answer. It should be very, very important to you.

What we do that makes us proud of ourselves inevitably involves service to others. Dentistry is a profession of benevolence. It proposes to leave patients better off after we treat them than before. It asks us to treat our patients as we would treat ourselves and our families. It asks us to treat our communities with the same dignity and respect and to encourage others to behave in a like manner.

And yet the world we live in remains filled with ignorance, fear, superstition, prejudice, and presumptive ar-

rogance. Conflict and hostility have existed since the beginning of recorded time, despite the efforts of every major philosophy and theology to teach benevolence, harmony, and universal love. Violence and hatred fill the international news; no area of the world is immune. The moans of human suffering remain in our ears constantly.

What should dentists do? Philosophically, we should promote tolerance and celebrate diversity because it is the right thing to do, for all people and at all times. Pragmatically, if our communities are torn by violence and intolerance, our livelihood is threatened. We spend our days promoting and creating oral health and beauty. We talk to patients about healthy lifestyles. We need to talk with them about emotional health beyond the office—the benefits of being "other"-focused. Healthy styles of living demand harmonious relationships with others, *all* others. The smiles we create suggest love and tolerance, not violence and hatred.

The dental office is an ideal place to launch community outreach programs that promote the higher ideals of human behavior. There are many programs worldwide that we can and should participate in. In fact, an American dental products manufacturer recently announced one particularly good example of such a program.³

The conclusion? Dentists are obligated to be examples of beneficence not only in the treatments they render, but also in their everyday behavior with their families, friends, patients, and communities. The gentle hand of healing should never be raised, either physically or emotionally, literally or figuratively, against another person. Let's all help teach it to the world.

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Suggested reading

1. Rule JT, Veatch RM. Ethical Questions in Dentistry. Chicago: Quintessence, 1993:chapter 2.
2. Weinstein BD. Dental Ethics. Malvern, PA: Lea and Febiger, 1993:chapter 1.
3. Fischer D. Smiles Against Hate [press kit]. South Jordan, UT: Ultradent Products, 2000.