

Applying the NYSDA Code of Ethics to Real-World Dentistry

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Dentists, along with other healthcare providers, are members of a profession with the highest ethical standards. Consequently, ethics can affect virtually every decision made in the office. This requires a strong sense of moral judgment and action. Though we all have our own moral compasses, it is rather helpful to consult a proper code of ethics to help us make

informed ethical decisions.

Ethics and law have a lot of crossovers, but it is important to note some key discrepancies. In contrast to laws, which can be set in stone, ethical issues are subject to interpretation regarding what is “right” or “wrong” in a particular situation—there may be no clear answer. Laws set the minimum standard of behavior, while ethics set the highest standard of conduct. The law deals with what you must do, while ethics deals with what you should do according to the core ethical values in healthcare. These include non-maleficence (to do no harm), beneficence (to do good), autonomy (respect for persons), justice (duty to treat people without prejudice), and veracity (truthfulness). It is the duty of dental healthcare professionals to consistently practice with these pillars in mind to not only gain credibility, but also the trust of patients.

Ultimately, ethics and professionalism are essential for success in any profession. As such, it is crucial to understand that new issues and dilemmas will constantly and inevitably arise. It is up to the professional, however, to be proactive and to take the time to educate oneself on how to best deal with difficult ethical situations. After all, you never know when you might find yourself in the middle of one.

The NYCDS ethics committee held an online program entitled “Applying the NYSDA Code of Ethics to Real-World Dentistry” on November 9. Dr. Julie Connolly, NYCDS Representative on the NYSDA Ethics Council, and I co-led this event. The genesis of this event came from the NYSDA Ethics Council to help promote ethics and professionalism within New York State. The event was well attended, and participants engaged in thoughtful discussion on how to handle various ethical dilemmas. The goals were to understand why ethics are essential to the establishment of a trusted health professional, to become familiar with the NYSDA code of ethics (including the five fundamental principles of ethics stated earlier), and to recognize

and deal with common ethical dilemmas applicable to real-world dentists. The ethical dilemma cases were developed by the council, which mirrored real-life complaints that have come before the council in the past.

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Three methods of case analysis were utilized: open discussion, protocol for ethical decision-making (a principle-based approach), and the narrative ethics rubric (an approach based on storytelling and empathy). The program does not provide answers or solutions to all dilemmas that could be encountered in practice but will certainly reinforce the overarching goals of NYSDA and NYCDS to produce responsible clinicians, to help dental providers recognize the ethical components of healthcare, and to integrate ethical principles into clinical practice.

We encourage you to watch this informative and interactive video regarding ethical dilemmas relevant to today.

