

What's a Dentist to Do? "Just" Dentistry

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Cases With Faces

Jim has been a patient of Dr. M's for many years. He is a good patient, motivated, always on time, pays his bills; a patient who Dr. M and his staff always look forward to seeing when spotted on the schedule. He and his wife, Beth, are pillars of the community, involved and always giving to others in innumerable ways. This is all the more impressive because Jim and Beth have a mentally disabled son, William.

Jim is a machinist. Beth stays at home to care for William. Though financially challenged, they do not qualify for any public assistance programs.

Jim came to his recent appointment with bad news. He had just lost his job. William was also in and was found to have an upper right premolar that broke off the entire buccal cusp. To fill the tooth would be to compromise its strength. The best choice would be a crown. However, Jim and Beth could not afford a crown for William due to Jim's lay-off and the expense of care for their son.

What would be the just thing to do?

The Question Bin Is Full Again

Justice — what does it mean to us as dentists?

As individuals within each of our practices and on a more societal level, we need to distribute resources and services to people often when such resources and services are not only

finite but limited. Treating people fairly, giving them what they need, and giving them what they are entitled to, are often different and can come into conflict.

One could flip a coin, but that is not fair because need is not considered. We could allocate care based on what they deserve, but do they deserve care based on what they need, what they want, because they can afford it, etc.? What are the criteria?

Add to all this the issue of entitlement. Who is entitled to dental care, and on what basis? With dental resources being scarce, should allocated services be limited to elimination of pain and infection and/or minimal restoration of function?

Should entitlement be limited to groups who otherwise could not access care? Or is entitlement all-inclusive?

Lots of questions. No simple answers.

Case(s) In Point

Obviously relevant in public policy discussions, the role justice plays in our individual offices is equally as important.

Is a patient whom you have never seen in your practice, who calls in the middle of the night, entitled to emergency care? Should we compromise treatment when a patient cannot afford proper care? Should a dentist provide reduced-fee dentistry for a nursing home when his or her practice is very busy? How should we treat an adolescent teen on Medical Assistance who has enamel dysplasia?

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Please e-mail us at kdegrote@mndental.org or fax us at (651) 646-8246. We look forward to hearing from you not only regarding this article, but also if you have any ethical dilemmas you would like to present to the membership. Perhaps we can help you decide what to do.

Making Justice Real — and Accessible

Justice is not theoretical, and it is not solely the realm of public policy makers. It comes into play in our offices every single day.

The term "distributive justice" is often used in managing the distribution of society's benefits and burdens. However, which groups receive benefits and which assume the burdens? Aristotle's "Formal Principles of Justice" states that "... equals must be treated equally, and unequals must be treated unequally." This is quite vague. Who is "equal"? Who is "unequal"?

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***Ideas and material quoted and paraphrased in this article are from Dental Ethics at Chairsides: Professional Principles and Practical Applications by David T. Ozar, Ph.D. and David J. Sokol, D.D.S., J.D., F.A.G.D., Georgetown University Press, Washington, D.C.*

Ethics Committee

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Distribution theories are three:

1. Utilitarian; that is, distribution is based on need only, which leads to maximizing the aggregate good for society.
2. Libertarian; that is, distribution is based on a respect for autonomy, and is attained when dentistry is based on free-market exchange. Need is not a factor. Libertarians do provide for those in need, but it is done through freely given charity, not through the principle of justice.
3. Egalitarian; that is, the features of people's lives are determined by accidents and circumstances beyond their control and that distribution of care should be based on giving people equal opportunities to have their needs met.

Other public and individual distribution policies are conceived considering and merging these three views. For instance, our offices' distribution of services is based on the libertarian free market system, but sprinkled with PPOs and/or capitation plans. Also, our federal, state, and local governments have programs designed to provide dentistry to needy groups of people.

Thought Into Action

So what should Dr. M do? Should he provide the crown for William, or just the amalgam? Well, he could provide the crown at cost or extend a liberal credit allowance that would make the crown affordable. Another option would be to provide the crown after encouraging Jim and Beth to enlist William in the DDS program. This is a great way to give something back to our communities.

Minnesota Donated Dental Services

Minnesota Donated Dental Services (DDS) is a program which not only provides the needy with dental care, but also gives the provider choices.

This is how it works:

A participating dentist will receive a communiqué from DDS with the name and a short history of a patient. The dentist at that point either accepts or denies (declines) the patient. If he accepts, he appoints the patient. After seeing the patient for the first time, the dentist again has a choice of acceptance or denial. If he accepts the patient a second time, he treats him or her at no charge.

As well as the dentists who volunteer with DDS, dental laboratories are lined up to provide lab work at no charge. DDS has also enlisted specialists into the program so the dentist has the help of oral surgeons, endodontists, periodontists, and so forth.

The patients I have treated have been genuinely appreciative of what we are doing for them. I have never had trouble with no-shows. However, if that is a problem, the participating dentist can contact DDS and they will deal with the situation directly. If it cannot be resolved, the patient will be terminated.

To qualify as a patient, an individual must be more than 65 years of age and disabled. Children also may qualify, with or without disabilities. Those who qualify must be without means and must not have insurance.

Donated Dental Services is a program that is hands-on and individualized, and participating dentists will always have contact persons at DDS. It is a great way to give back and a great way to help someone who needs dental services. Being a provider also earns continuing education credits.

For further information, please call Molly Schuneman at (651) 454-6290 or toll free at (866) 242-6290 and give it a try. ■