

What's a Dentist to Do? Values, Part Two

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In our previous column,** we discussed the six central values of dental practice.†† Beginning with the most important, they are:

1. The patient's life and general health
2. The patient's oral health
3. The patient's autonomy
4. The dentist's preferred patterns of practice
5. Esthetic values
6. Efficiency in the use of resources

Although most often our day-to-day decisions involve only one of these values, there will be occasions where two or more values are involved. That is when we must prioritize, and that is when the above ranking will come into the picture.

It may seem obvious to state that dental treatment that compromises a patient's life or general health is unprofessional. The one time it could occur, however, is when the oral condition being treated is itself life- or health-threatening and a given treatment, although risky, could improve the condition.

Oral health is our profession's most obvious value, and it appears next on the scale of importance. However, "minor trade-offs of oral function may be acceptable for the sake of the patient's autonomy or esthetic values" — but only if they do not cause harm to the patient.

The third value, the patient's autonomy, can be easy to state. If a patient chooses treatment that would be harmful to him or her, it is ethical for us to refuse to provide that treatment. Value #1 takes precedent over value #3. If there are several treatments available that would support the patient's health and the

doctor does not respect the patient's choice for the sake of esthetics or to save on the laboratory bill, that would be unprofessional.

Some decisions become more complex when the patient's autonomy conflicts with the dentist's preferred patterns of practice. Although our profession's norms are "the fruit of an ongoing dialogue between the profession and the larger community", the mere fact each of us has his or her preferred methods of practicing dentistry does not usurp a patient's right to choose his or her treatment, provided the patient's health is not compromised. The patient's health is of primary consideration. All patients' treatments which support the above shall be undertaken with the patient's complete participation, but autonomy may not be chosen ahead of the patient's health. When there are healthy choices available, informing patients of alternatives and respecting their choices is mandatory. Unhealthy choices need not be presented to the patient because such treatment would not satisfy value #1.

Our patients' judgment of dental esthetics is totally subjective. Our profession's judgment of the same is certainly more objective and is arrived at through years of training and experience forming a pattern of practice. It seems logical that the latter would take precedence over the former. Esthetic values rank higher than the efficient use of resources because if esthetics is indeed a central value of dental practice, then "employing resources to accomplish them is not a waste".

Are we as dentists professionally

required to do whatever our patients ask for in regard to esthetics? How much sacrifice of effort, resources etc. is required for the well being of our patients? Is the amount of this required sacrifice less as we move down the value hierarchy? We are all committed to our patients, but such a commitment necessarily has limits.

So when faced with a difficult ethical situation in your practice, contemplate this prioritized list of our six central values. It may help you.

In our next installment, we will pose an actual clinical example of the conflict of dentistry's central values. ■

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.

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