

What's a Dentist to Do? What Are Friends For?

Please e-mail us at info@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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Dr. A and Dr. B have been friends for a long time. They grew up together. They have been best buddies since elementary school. They played sports together on the same youth baseball team and were co-captains of their high school's football team. Each was best man in the other's wedding. They were even classmates in dental school, Dr. B having gone on to specialize in oral surgery. They settled and currently practice in the same community and see each other regularly.

Dr. A, of course, refers to Dr. B regularly and has been doing so for many years. Recently, however, "Dr. A has been made aware of some disturbing stories about Dr. B. For example, he has heard that recently Dr. B has had a series of emotional outbursts in his office. Also, reports have been circulating that Dr. B's fees have become disproportionately high. Recently a patient told Dr. A that he did not like the cleanliness of Dr. B's office. It was a vague complaint, not related to

personal cleanliness, but a complaint nevertheless. Finally, a personal friend, who is also a dentist, recently told Dr. A that he thinks Dr. B's professional care is slipping.

"Dr. A's own observations are that Dr. B's care of Dr. A's patients is still very good, but he is disturbed about the things that he is hearing. He is also aware that his office staff hears the same things and is concerned about the possible damage to Dr. B's reputation if these remarks are repeated. He wonders if he should stop referring patients to Dr. B, but he has obligations to Dr. B which spring from years of friendship. He feels that there is no objective reason to stop referring but worries about the significance of these disturbing pieces of information in terms of Dr. B's future ability to manage patients adequately."

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Dr. A is worried his friend has developed problems, perhaps mental problems, that may be compromising the care he gives his patients. Evidence of such is admittedly weak. Should Dr. A continue to refer to his friend? Would it be ethical to stop referring based on such flimsy evidence? Does Dr. A have a duty to see to it

that other patients besides his own not be harmed? What about Dr. A's obligation to Dr. B as a friend?

As adults we have many obligations — to our families, to our friends, to our patients. In this case, Dr. A has the opportunity to fulfill his obligations to his patients and his

friend simultaneously. He is, of course, obliged to his patients to make sure they get the best care in oral surgery. He is also obliged to see to it that the community at large is not harmed by an impaired dentist.

Dr. A is also obligated to his friend, Dr. B. They have a long history together. What describes a true friend? Andy Andrews says that "true friends don't necessarily accept each other as they are. Heck, the clerk at the fast food drive thru accepts you as you are! True friends hold each other to a higher standard. A friend expects you to do what you were going to do when you said you were going to do it. Friends make one another better people."**

Dr. B is in a bad place, and Dr. A should recognize this. He should not accept Dr. B as he is, but help him get to a better place. As a friend, Dr. A should investigate his friend's situation and see to it that if he needs help, he gets it. He should get involved not only for his patients but for his friend. After all, what are friends for? ■

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***Andy Andrews — The Seven Decisions, 2 CD set, Live TV Soundtrack Performance, Faust Entertainment Corp., 2005.*

Material quoted and ideas in this article are from Case 110 in Ethical Questions in Dentistry by James T. Rule, DDS, MS and Robert M. Veatch, PhD, Quintessence Publishing Co., Inc., Chicago, IL.