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# "The Profession of Dentistry:" The University of Kentucky's Curriculum in Professional Ethics

David A. Nash, DMD, EdD, FACD

## *Abstract*

Among the most important learning that occurs in our nation's colleges of dentistry is learning to be a professional. While knowledge, perceptual-motor skills, and problem-solving abilities are basic to becoming a dentist, helping aspiring colleagues to apply their newly developing skills with integrity must be a fundamental concern. Increasingly, we are realizing that the quality of health care depends as significantly on the character of the health professional as it does on the individual's knowledge and skills. Concern for character, virtue, and integrity is the domain of ethics. This paper advances a justification for including a curriculum in professional ethics in our dental educational programs. The professional ethics curriculum at the University of Kentucky, "The Profession of Dentistry," extends through all four years of the Doctor of Dental Medicine program. The paper describes the major goals pursued in the curriculum and outlines the content of each of the four, sixteen-clock-hour courses. Learning ethics experientially through living in a college community is reviewed in the context of the College of Dentistry's comprehensive Code of Professional Conduct and Academic Responsibility. An assumption of the curriculum is, if the professional relationship of dentistry with society is to be sustained, each new generation of dentists must understand the nature of the profession and the ethical obligations of becoming a member of the dental profession.

Among the most important learning that occurs in our nation's colleges of dentistry is learning to be a professional. While knowledge, perceptual-motor skills, and problem-solving abilities are basic to becoming a dentist and demand major time and attention in our curricula, helping aspiring colleagues apply their newly developing skills with

integrity must be a fundamental concern. Dentistry is a profession because of its commitment to serving the public in gaining the benefits of oral health. The caring behavior of previous generations of dentists, and their commitment to ethical conduct, have earned the profession the trust and confidence of society. To sustain this professional relationship, each new generation of dentists

must understand the nature of a profession and the ethical obligations incurred as a member of the dental profession.

The professional ethics curriculum at the University of Kentucky, entitled "The Profession of Dentistry," extends through all four years of the Doctor of Dental Medicine (DMD) program. Each year for four years, students participate in sixteen hours of classroom interaction and learning focused on ethics in the context of the dental profession. The College's dean is the course director and an active participant in each course. The dean's role is both substantive and symbolic — substantive in providing an integrating perspective and symbolically expressing the value, importance, and relevance of ethics to the dental profession. While classroom instruction and learning are fundamental to a professional ethics curriculum, there must also be a laboratory for learning, in this case, participating in the ethical life of the college community. This experiential learning of professional ethics by



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### The Profession of Dentistry I — First-Year Course

- Ethics and Life...as a Dentist: *How should we live...and, as dentists, should we live differently than others?*
- The Terrain of Ethics: *What's ethics all about?*
- Ethics of Aspiration: *What goals should I set for my life?*
- Psychology of Aspiration: *How should I pursue my life's goals?*
- Living in Society: *How can humans live in a society where everyone is pursuing their personal best interests or goals?*
- The Ethics of Obligation: *How should I behave to promote a cooperative society where I, and every other human, can pursue a life's plan?*
- The Concept of Profession: *What does it mean to be a member of a profession...to be a professional?*
- The Ethics of Profession: *As a dentist, should I live differently than the ordinary person, and if so, how and why?*

students is framed by the College's *Code of Professional and Academic Responsibility*, which also guides the behavior of faculty and helps place the responsibility for morally appropriate conduct within the individual, where it ultimately resides.

#### Purpose of the Curriculum

Professional education in dentistry exists to educate good dentists — dentists equipped and committed to helping their patients and society gain oral health. In achieving this intention, dental educators acknowledge that the complex knowledge base and the sophisticated perceptual-motor skills of dentistry must be applied with integrity by the individual practitioner. Graduating knowledgeable, skilled clinicians is a necessary condition but not sufficient for ensuring quality oral health care. The further requirement is the commitment of graduates to applying their abilities with integrity, that is, providing quality care in their patients' interest. Ultimately, good dentistry depends on individuals committed to treating their patients and society fairly, that is, ethically. Thus, the justification for teaching professional ethics in dentistry is to facilitate the personal

and professional development of aspiring dentists into socially and professionally responsible human beings.

Some argue that the moral conscience is developed early in life and if student dentists are not morally virtuous upon matriculation, instruction in ethics is futile. Early moral education is an important determinant of one's commitment to the moral life. Moral virtue is the habit of making good and right choices. Through repeated behaviors in our formative years, habits of action are developed, some supportive of living the moral life, others potentially not. Intelligent reflection, with disciplined substitution of alternative behaviors, is necessary to break bad habits and replace them with good ones.

Education is a reflective experience that leads to behavioral change. In fact, education cannot be said to occur absent behavioral change. To suggest that education cannot change behavior, including behavior with moral consequences, is to adopt an intolerable skepticism about education. No doubt the virtue of student dentists varies, with some finding it easier to do the good and right thing once an appropriate course of action is determined. While

acknowledging variations among individuals, the intention of the professional ethics curriculum is to facilitate all student dentists becoming good dentists. The curriculum works to dispel the idea morality is optional — it is only for those wanting to be either altruistic or religious; and to help students understand morality is essential to cooperation among people living in a civil society where each person may achieve the greatest good and suffer the least evil. While the curriculum seeks to elicit a sense of moral obligation, it is not intended to change behavior directly as this could be considered indoctrination. Rather, it provides a framework for students to sense and consider the moral obligations they incur in society, both as individuals and as dentists. Such intelligent reflection can serve as a basis for determining whether changes are required in their moral habits and behavior.

#### Goals of the Curriculum

The intent of the curriculum is fulfilled by the following:<sup>1</sup>

*To sensitize student dentists to the moral dimensions of life and professional practice.* A goal is to assist students in understanding that human beings live in a complex matrix of relationships, with consequences for good and evil. Certain behaviors can be judged right or wrong, depending on the context and consequence. Ethical problems frequently are embedded and unidentified in life's circumstances. Evaluating situations in the context of their potential for good and evil sensitizes students to the idea there is a moral perspective. Ethics is the branch of philosophy that reflects on the good. Ethics as a discipline is concerned with goodness and badness, rightness and wrongness, virtue and vice, approval and disapproval, ends and means, and judgments of value and judgments of obligation. Professing dentistry as a life's calling intensifies the moral dimension of life, as patients seek relationships with dentists in order for dentists to do good for them with regard to their oral health.

*To develop skills of ethical analysis.* The cognitive tools of ethics are required to critically and reflectively consider alternative courses of action with the potential for good or evil consequences. Ethics is the science of the moral. Analysis skills must be developed in using the concepts, principles, and rules of ethics. Problem-solving abilities in ethics have real practical value. Choices in life have consequences for the individuals making choices and those affected by their choices. Critical thinking in ethics assists student dentists as human beings and as health professionals in discriminating between good and evil and, therefore, right and wrong behavior.

*To foster respect for disagreement and toleration of ambiguity.* Although precise and rigorous, ethics does not necessarily enable one to determine that only one action is moral. Choices sometimes must be made between conflicting goods, and at other times, choices must be made among alternatives all with potentially negative consequences. Equally virtuous people may disagree on courses of action. However, care must be taken to ensure that the grounds for disagreement among them are reasonable and logical. Dentists, as all humans, must learn to be tolerant of other's views to the extent these views comport with human rationality. A curriculum goal is to enable student dentists to acknowledge that much of human life is ambiguous and to learn to tolerate ambiguity. Tolerance for ambiguity acknowledges there are many dimensions of existence in which no definitive behavior is ideal or conclusive.

*To assist student dentists in explicating the moral responsibilities in becoming a member of the profession of dentistry.* The relationship of the profession of dentistry with society and with individuals is best understood as a cooperative relationship, with mutual benefits and burdens. Professing of dentistry as a life's work is a promise to society to care for its oral health and to use the art and science of the profession to cure oral disease. The good of both parties is basic to the complex relationship of care-provider and care-re-

ceiver. However, because the relationship is complex, circumstances emerge in which harm can occur. To be concerned with ethics is to be concerned with good and harm, benefit and burden. The curriculum seeks to explicate concepts, principles, and rules that should be considered in forging cooperative relationships that ensure all parties obtain the greatest good possible and are treated justly or fairly. The curriculum explores the terms of cooperation when patients seek the care of dentists, as well as between the profession and society in general.

*To motivate continued learning of ethics.* Authentic education prepares for and promotes further learning. A substantive goal of the curriculum is to develop a positive attitude toward ethics so dentists will seek opportunities to further their knowledge and understanding after graduation.

The curriculum is not intended to disavow or discredit any student's ethical tradition or heritage. Rather, in achieving the above goals, one's ethical precepts will be placed in the larger context of a pluralistic society. The concepts, principles, and rules of ethics used

throughout the curriculum are foundational — ones intelligent, reasonable people can agree upon — and are not knowingly inconsistent with any religion's or culture's ethical tradition.

#### The Curriculum

*Ethics and Life As a Dentist.* The first-year course begins with matriculation in the college. From the first day as new colleagues in dentistry, it is intended that students begin to understand the essential nature of life as a professional...as a dentist. The major question the course addresses is, "How should we live and, as dentists, should we live differently than others?" The sidebar outlines the topics and questions of this course. A rational basis for living the moral life as an ordinary human being is discussed. Through exercises, students clarify their life-time goals, considering why and how they should pursue such goals. A pivotal issue is exploring how it is possible for human beings to live in a society where everyone is pursuing their own personal goals. From this question evolves the imperative to live the moral life, of cooperating with others to achieve well-being for all. Teaching and

### The Profession of Dentistry II — Second-Year Course

- Ethics in Clinical Dentistry: *How do dentists interact with their patients for the good of both?*
- The Patient as a Person: *What are appropriate attitudes toward patients?*
- The Virtues in Professional Ethics: *What is the relationship of virtue to behavior?*
- The Ethics/Duties of Dentists: *What specific duties do dentists have to patients in the clinical setting?*
- Informed Consent: *How do I gain a patient's valid consent to benefit their oral health?*
- Confidentiality: *How far does the dentist's obligation to respect the privacy of the patient extend?*
- To Treat or Not Treat: *To what extent may a dentist exercise preference in whom to and whom not to treat?*
- The Responsibilities of Patients: *What are the duties of patients to their dentists?*

The Profession of Dentistry III — Third-Year Course

- Justice and Jurisprudence: *How do society and dentistry interact for the good of the public and the profession?*
- Relationship of the Profession and Society: *What metaphor or model can we use to best understand the relationship of dentistry to society?*
- Contextual Framework for Law: *What is the role of law in American democracy?*
- Contract Law and the Dentist-Patient Relationship: *What commitments are made when entering into the dentist-patient relationship that are enforceable by law?*
- Torts and the Dentists: *What "rights" do patients have when "wronged" by their dentists?*
- Justice and Health Care Allocation: *What is just in allocating health care?*
- Appropriating Justice Between Dentistry and Society in Kentucky: *What are Kentucky's laws governing the practice of dentistry?*

learning then move to the extraordinary moral duties of being a dentist. The nature of the profession is carefully considered, drawing on the literature of history and sociology. The extraordinary ethical conduct required in becoming a member of a learned profession, such as dentistry, is explicated based on the social covenant professions have with the public.

*Ethics in Clinical Dentistry.* During the second year, student dentists grapple with the question, "How do dentists interact with their patients for the good of both?" In this course, future practitioners consider the unique duties of dentists including: respecting patients as ends in themselves, not merely means to our ends as dentists; the importance of clear and reciprocal communication with patients; and how dentists can respond to patients empathetically. Benefiting patients with the highest quality of care is advanced as a moral imperative. Yet, students consider the obligation of dentists to respect their patients' autonomy as a critically important moral principle. Discussion focuses on ways in which dentists can ensure patients' full participation in clinical decision-making. Methods for gaining an informed consent to

care are role-played. An interesting and lively discussion is always precipitated with the question "To what extent may a dentist exercise preference in whom to and whom not to treat?" Issues associated with treating culturally diverse, economically deprived, medically compromised, and generally difficult patients are discussed. The course also considers patients' responsibilities to dentists — a welcomed balance. In this course and throughout the curriculum, small discussion groups are used, with faculty members facilitating consideration of ethical issues derived from case scenarios. This methodology permits student dentists to become actively engaged with the topic and to appreciate the practical relevance of ethics to clinical dentistry.

*Justice and Jurisprudence.* Issues of ethics are ultimately grounded in the principle of justice: what is fair. Jurisprudence is best taught and understood in the context of law approximating and appropriating the ethical ideal of justice. This matter is addressed in the third year of the curriculum. The question is raised, "How do society and dentistry interact for the good of the public and the profession?" Students struggle with issues

of fairness in the complex relationship between society and the profession and between the individual patient and dentist in the caring relationship. The concept of covenant is used as a metaphor for understanding the nature of these relationships. As the covenant relationship is regulated and monitored by society, contractual obligations enforceable by law are discussed, as is the issue of torts or wrongs suffered by either party in the relationship. Student dentists also study the problem of justice in allocating health care and consider different systems for ensuring that all members of society have access to a reasonable level of oral health.

*The Organized Profession.* In year four, the curriculum focuses on the organized profession and its role in professional ethics. Professionals organize their efforts to benefit society. Some benefits require professional action only attained through concerted effort. In this course, the question is asked, "How do dentists interact with one another?" Students are introduced to the history of dentistry as a profession, including its development through the twentieth century. The structure, functions, and benefits of organized dentistry are outlined. A particular focus is professional self-regulation. The American Dental Association's *Principles of Ethics and Code of Professional Conduct* is examined closely and used as a guide for discussing practical implications of professional ethics. Peer review, disciplinary hearings, and professional sanctions are considered. The question of why and when dentists should challenge the integrity of their colleagues is debated. In this context, the ethics of "whistle blowing" is considered. The course and curriculum conclude the week of graduation with an assessment of the future of dentistry and the important role each new graduate can play in ensuring the profession's future by serving the public faithfully and fairly.

*The Learning Laboratory*

Individuals learn moral values and moral behavior through experience,

that is, interacting with others. A pedagogical approach that relies on classroom exchanges alone likely will not be successful in achieving the intention of the "Profession of Dentistry" curriculum. To be appropriated personally, professional ethics must be directly experienced through life with members of the college community and through the policies and practices of the college as an organization. Teaching through personal example and role modeling are powerful instructional tools. An approach to collegiate life that relies on external authority and fear of punishment to ensure moral integrity will not have the effect of developing dentists with enlightened ethical judgment and a personal commitment to the moral life.

As a consequence, the college developed a *Code of Professional Conduct and Academic Responsibility* to engage student dentists and faculty in the moral life of the college and to provide a vehicle for professional self-regulation. Through understanding of and commitment to a codified standard of behavior, members of the college participate in an experiential laboratory for transmitting and learning principles of professional ethics and responsibility. Integrity is an essential professional quality and self-governance is an important professional responsibility. The college's code becomes a means to guide and govern behavior within the college community.

The linkage of the curriculum to a code of academic and professional responsibility, integrated with the University of Kentucky Medical Center's Professional Behavior Code are significant features of the approach to professional ethics. The college's code includes behavioral standards for health professionals, adopted by the broader medical center community. These standards are drawn from the practice acts of the health professions. Generally, the standards address actions that would violate the tenets of being a professional and cause damage to the covenant between the health professions and the public. Specific examples of such behaviors are: endangering patients or the public; de-

ceiving, defrauding, or harming the public; failure to maintain confidentiality; falsification of health records; abuse of a controlled substance or drug; and chronic or persistent use of alcohol. The scope of the college's code includes academic infractions, such as plagiarism, cheating, and falsification of academic records, as well as misconduct in research. Non-academic infractions, such as theft and lying are also addressed.

The design and scope of the *Code of Professional Conduct and Academic Responsibility* are comprehensive and intended to address professional life and its associated responsibilities. Combining the college's code with the professional ethics curriculum enables the College of Dentistry to integrate its expectations for professional development with the larger medical center and university communities.

*Conclusion*

The University of Kentucky's "Profession of Dentistry" curriculum offers students a comprehensive introduction to the ethics of the profession of dentistry and affords graduates four years of experience in living the life of a self-

governing, responsible professional person. The college's "Profession of Dentistry" curriculum, its *Code of Professional Conduct and Academic Responsibility*, and its spirit of community offer responsible leadership for the important topic of professional ethics. What is more basic, more important, or of more ultimate concern than, "how should we to live...and why?"

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The Profession of Dentistry IV — Fourth-Year Course

- The Organized Profession: *How do dentists interact with one another?*
- A Retrospective on Teeth: *How has humankind historically treated oral problems?*
- Development of the Profession of Dentistry in America: *How has dentistry emerged as a profession?*
- Architecture of the Profession: *How is the profession organized today?*
- The ADA Principles of Ethics and Code of Professional Conduct: *What are the profession's standards of self-regulation?*
- Professional Self-Regulation: *How do dentists work with one another to preserve the relationship of the profession with society?*
- The Ethics of Whistle Blowing: *Why and when should dentists challenge the integrity of their colleagues?*
- The Future of Dentistry: *What can I expect in my professional future?*