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

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

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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 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 (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...
The Profession of Dentistry — 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 is ethics all about?
- Ethics of Education: What goals should set for my life?
- Psychology of Aspiration: How should I behave to promote the good of life, as patients seek relationships with dentists, and to be different than the ordinary person, and if so, how and why?

Purpose of the Curriculum

Professional education in dentistry aims to educate good dentists — dentists equipped and committed to helping their patients and society gain oral health. In achieving this aim, dental education acknowledges that the complex biological and the psychological and perceptual-motor skills of dentistry must be applied to the individual patient by the individual practitioner. Graduating knowledgeable, skilled clinicians is a necessary condition but not sufficient for ensuring quality and health care. The further requirement is the commitment of graduates to applying their skills with integrity, that is, providing quality care in the patient's interest. Ultimately, good dentists depend on individuals committed to serving their patients and society, that is, ethics. 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 science is developed early in life and that moral decisions are not markedly affected upon matriculation, instruction in ethics is in order. Early moral education is an imperative determinant of one's commitment to the moral life. Moral views influence the making of right and good choices. Through repeated behavior in our formative years, habits of action are developed, some supportive of living the moral life, others potentially not. In this reflection, with disciplined reasoning, the nature of moral obligations can be made between conflicting goods, and at other times, choices must be made among alternatives all with potentially negative consequences. Equally, an effective and ethical practice requires determining whether changes are required in their moral balance and behavior.

Goals of the Curriculum

The intent of the curriculum is fulfilled by the following:

- To develop skills of ethical analysis. The cogitative tools of ethics are required to critically and reflectively consider alternative courses of action with the potential for good or evil consequences. Ethics in the science of the moral. Analytical skills must be developed in using the concepts, principles, and rules of ethics. Problem-solving abilities in ethics have both practical and theoretical value. Choices in life have consequences for the individual making choices and those affected by their choices. Critical thinking in ethics allows students to understand social and cultural situations in society, between individuals and as dentists. Such intellectual abilities can determine that only one course of 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, an ethical practice requires determining whether changes are required in their moral balance and behavior.

- To develop skills of ethical choice. The cogitative tools of ethics are critical in choosing or rejecting actions with the potential for good or evil consequences. How should I behave to promote the good of life, as patients seek relationships with dentists, and to be different than the ordinary person, and if so, how and why?

- To develop skills of ethical judgment. To be an effective and ethical professional requires ethical judgment, that is, the ability to determine that only one action is moral, what should be the right and wrong behavior.

- To develop skills of ethical action. What does it mean to be a dentist, should I live differently than the ordinary person, and if so, how and why?

- To develop skills of ethical context. How can humans live in a complex world? How should we live...and, as dentists, should we live differently than others? The side effect questions and topics of questions of this course. An extended basis for living the moral life is an ordinary person being discussed. Through exercises, students clarify their life-time goals, considering, when and why 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 throughout the curriculum are foundational...ones intelligent, reasonable people can agree upon...and are not necessarily inconsistent with any religious or cultural 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 college dentists in dentistry, it is intended that students begin to understand the essential nature of life as a professional...as a dentist. The major course the question and concern is, "How should we live...and, as dentists, should we live differently than others?" The side effect questions and topics of questions of this course. An extended basis for living the moral life is an ordinary person being discussed. Through exercises, students clarify their life-time goals, considering, when and why 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 throughout the curriculum are foundational...ones intelligent, reasonable people can agree upon...and are not necessarily inconsistent with any religious or cultural ethical tradition.
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 Dentist: What “rights” do patients have when “wronged” by their dentist?
- 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?

The course also considers patients’ responsibilities to a dentist — 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 students to become actively engaged with the topic and to appreciate the practical relevance of ethics to clinical dentistry.

In summation, issues of ethics are ultimately generalized in the principle of justice: what is fair, just, and right. An appreciation of the ethical ideal of justice is a theme addressed in the third year of the curriculum. The question is raised, “How should we decide who should get what?”

References

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