

Cheating- Who or What Does it Really Hurt?

Anyone who has ever survived the rigors of dental school knows that it is an arduous journey- pitting an accelerated pace of study and development of skills and techniques against the finite number of hours in a day. Multiple projects, deadlines and cramming information into an already saturated brain only to regurgitate it in an accurate, cogent nature for the next test all contribute to push students to the breaking point. The stress elements served up in school are dichotomous- a microcosm of life given in heaping, steaming piles of success and failure. The temptation to take a short cut in order to arrive at the diploma stage without doing the necessary work needed to achieve mastery of skills is ever present; skills that include the discipline of proper conduct and competency within our chosen profession. If an individual falls into moral compromise during the critical professional formative years of dental school, this same individual might find it justifiable to fall back on such habits in the professional arena. For this reason, it is tantamount that cheating in the dental school setting be dealt with in a swift, compassionate and uniform matter.

Cheating is lying, whether to one's self, one's peers or an institution. While this statement may seem unequivocal to the reader, I believe that cheating has gone from a clear issue of right and wrong to one that has varying degrees of blame, stigma and consequence. Punishment for cheating varies it seems as each situation is analyzed, defended and rationalized against the situation and character of the cheater. As a dental student, what would you do if you saw a classmate openly cheating on a test or project?

Competition can be unnecessarily brutal between classmates and even within ourselves as we strain against the pressures of school to grow and succeed; mettle is tested, skills are molded and personalities tempered by the forces necessary for transforming us into the competent professionals we strive to be. The process is meant to be comprehensive and dental students are well qualified for the arduous challenge. Having survived the winnowing process that is required for admission, dental students are not strangers to success. We have fought hard to win our seats in class and are programmed to expect earlier successes from undergrad to continue throughout our post baccalaureate years. Personal failure might be measured objectively or subjectively; regardless, dental students are likely to encounter both clinical and didactic failure during their four years of school. It is the fear of failure and the time consuming remediation associated with failure in an already time critical environment that promotes the temptation to cheat. The culture of your school determines your course of action when confronting a cheating classmate and that culture embodies a variety of attitudes, behaviors and interactions between students and faculty that must be considered before embarking on a course of action.

Here is your scenario.

Sitting down to a simulation lab practical, you nervously adjust your ADEC unit to prepare for the competency. All students have been given the objective and clear rules for the exercise. All typodonts have been checked for occlusion, teeth are clearly unprepared and all stations have been checked to insure that nothing except the prescribed armamentarium to complete the task and score sheets remain. As you take a deep breath and look towards the clock to check the start time, you notice that a classmate is furiously scribbling something on their test sheet. Before averting your gaze, you see the

crib notes in your classmate's hand barely concealed under the instrument table. The proctor calls out that the simulation is beginning and you observe your peer carefully slide the paper into their white coat.

When preparing teeth, there are multiple objectives that will make or break a prep. Dental students have dozens of criteria that must be performed in order to accomplish a clinically acceptable final product. Procedures in clinical dentistry, out of necessity, follow a strict protocol and sequence. Any deviation from either will compromise the end result. Additionally, any deficiencies along the way have a tendency to affect subsequent objectives; the earlier the issue the more calamitous the result. Students are taught zero tolerance from required criteria. While students may be encouraged to write down personal reminders during a practical, referring to a covertly prepared "cheat sheet" during the test is clearly cheating. Having observed the aforementioned activity, you must now deal with this circumstance.

Confronting the issue of cheating will have far reaching effects for both the cheater and the person reporting the cheating. Certainly, there is some degree of interdependence, for better or worse, with our classmates for the duration of our school years. "Ratting out" a classmate for unethical behavior can and will have far reaching repercussions for both parties. Classmates may ostracize either or both people and mistrust can permeate the group as the class divides into the camps of "accused" and "accuser". If cheating goes unreported, class rankings will be skewed as the cheater is scored inaccurately relative to classmates who receive accurate grading results for their abilities and efforts. The profession suffers as a whole as people who take the easy way out in school are also tempted to take short cuts as practitioners.

In order to find resolution to this dilemma, I would immediately consult with a trusted advisor at my institution. Before giving details, I would ask for clarification of the school's policy regarding cheating and what my responsibilities would be if I suspected someone of cheating. I would use this information as the basis to proceed forward. If I knew I was the only one who had witnessed the incident, I would know that by divulging my classmate's name I will have set myself up for a "My word against yours" scenario which could have a detrimental effect on me and my reputation in the eyes of my classmates. By remaining discrete and keeping the accused anonymous, yet in registering my concerns with a faculty member, I can choose to not directly confront the person. There is a possibility that more than one person saw the incident and if anyone else comes forward, I could be accused of complicity if I did not report. If I felt comfortable with my relationship with my classmate, I may choose to mention, in a non-threatening manner what I thought I had seen. With no hint of condemnation, I would tell my friend that their behavior might be construed as cheating and that the next time it might be someone less tolerant that sees them. I am not required to tell my classmate that I have alerted faculty and there is no reason for the suspected cheater to take offense. Either they were cheating or they were not. If they were, they know at least one person saw them and if not, they know to be more circumspect in future behavior to avoid suspicion. No threats, no blame, just a compassionate heads up that their behavior has been noted. If more than one person steps forward and corroborates the accusation, faculty will interview all parties involved and render a decision based on facts not feelings or assumptions.

In order to make an ethical decision in regards to a cheating classmate, I used the ACD test (assess, communicate, decide) for making ethical decisions. I questioned if there could have been any other possible reason for the student to be writing before the start of the practical. Knowing that there was a slim chance that what I had seen was something I may have misinterpreted; I still communicated my concerns to an advisor. Speaking with the advisor, I would have to admit to the possibility that maybe what I had seen was not what I thought I had seen thereby staying true to the assessment portion of my decision and leaving an opening for an alternative explanation. I decided not to divulge the name of my classmate or to confront them. Taking into account how other classmates would respond, and the very real possibility of negative repercussions, I felt that this was the best course of action. While this decision is a moral compromise because the incident would likely never be investigated, I know that the ramifications for me divulging my classmate's identity would overshadow any beneficence gained for my school.

The stance of ethicists is that ethics provide the baseline for determining a course of action that is good and just within the spirit or intent of a rule. The rule may or may not be good and just, and the dental provider must be comfortable making independent moral arguments for ethical decisions as to what needs to be done and why something should be done. It is essential that these critical thinking skills are practiced and improved upon in the dental school setting because the issues of ethics and morality do not disappear after graduation, they multiply. Almost every decision made in the dental office is guided by some ethical principle and these decisions are critical to the aim of providing service to patients; the reason why we become dentists. Cheating undermines the moral growth of the student by preventing honest introspection and stifling ethical challenges within oneself for decisions made. If one cannot be honest with one's self, how can they be honest with their patient?

In days past, society would hold us responsible when people were caught lying or cheating through the use of guilt, shame and consequences. Regrettably, cheating in our society has become a means to an end. As our small inner voices, ingrained from parental admonitions and fear of retribution are drowned out by the daily cacophony of news stories about people who cheat and are successful, guilt and shame are no longer powerful deterrents to cheating. The rewards can be huge and it is difficult not to be seduced by a false sense of security when blatant cheaters are rewarded. Lauded and respected, we all know these characters, seemingly always on the right side of the law yet obviously running afoul of the spirit or intent of it. While consequences doled out to the "caught" can be salacious and overly entertaining, society's response is more about forgive and forget than any lasting condemnation. A tearful apology or a sizable contribution to a worthy cause can allow the most egregious of sins to evaporate into thin air and we as a society are also guilty of either not wanting to get involved or making excuses for the maleficence of people we like and admire. This popular cultural stance must not be tolerated in the dental setting because it undermines professionalism as ethics are thrown out and replaced with a "feel good" attitude of benign forgiveness.

If society has lost the moral compass to hold people responsible for their actions, we as dental professionals have an obligation to monitor our own and send the message that cheating will not be tolerated in dental school, as it will not be tolerated in clinical dentistry, as it should not be tolerated in life. Cheating is lying and should be treated as such. We need to identify instances of cheating and as a

profession address cheating as we would any other ethical dilemma- with uncompromising veracity, a deep commitment to non-maleficence and the distribution of fair and consistent justice.