

Ethics on our Sleeve

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Right and wrong. Black and white. Easy and difficult.

This is the world most of us grew up in. The world of definite sides and clear distinctions. A world of moral clarity.

And then things changed. Someone slips a white coat over our shoulders and not long after we realize there's much more going on. It's not as simple as filling a cavity or giving teeth to someone who has none. Dentistry is an iceberg. And we can't see below the surface until we're given a snorkel and set of goggles. And we aren't given the right set until we have said the right things and made the right test scores and signed the right dotted lines.

We all enter this profession because we want to make an impact on the people around us. We work hard. We make sacrifices that can only be explained by altruism. For many of us, we truly are in it for the right reasons.

But what I'm learning is that there's more to that story.

I once thought dentistry was only about fixing teeth. About helping people. And it is, of course. But what I am beginning to realize is that wrapped up within the "DMD" title is a wealth of mental warfare. And on the front lines of that war is the struggle for keeping ethical priority in our practice. A battle we face every single day.

We are under attack each time we throw on the loupes and white coat. And unlike most wars, ours is fought with our minds and thoughts and willpower. Every day, we are at risk of giving in to *ethical apathy*. The risk of forgetting where we are and how we got here.

The truth is that we've come a long way. We dragged ourselves through college and dental school and boards and licensing exams. And all the while we are missing meals and losing nights of sleep and thinking to ourselves "if only I could just get through this, it would all be worth it."

And then we get there. We cross that finish line. And then some of us forget.

We forget those hours in the library. We forget the summer jobs. We forget the long weekends of studying Gross Anatomy and marginal ridge differences of premolars. We forget all the money and effort and stress we spent on trying to become a dentist. And so then we let our guard down, and we make mistakes.

What I'm learning is that if we don't wear our ethics out on our sleeve, we run the risk of it falling through a hole in our coat pocket.

So let's talk about ethics.

We all exist in this delicate balance of patient trust. Conversations, technology, treatment plans, risks and benefits, consent forms. These are all factors in the balance. And so every conversation and every decision we make with a patient has a shifting effect in one direction or the other.

Maintaining balance in a profession as diverse as dentistry is challenging. Even as a student, I can clearly see the many edges of the dental polygon. We all have our opinions on restorative materials and bonding techniques and whether or not we should use rubber dams or a facebow for every case.

We are as diverse as they come. And that's okay. We can present our research. We can state our opinions. But one thing that we must not do. One thing we cannot do, is compromise our patient's trust in the profession of dentistry.

Because that balance of patient trust is not between the individual patient and the individual dentist. The balance is between America the Patient and Dentistry the Profession. What we need to understand is that "dentist" is not a singularity. Regardless of whether you practice in a town of 1,000 or 100,000, the dental community is a network. We are a team. And when one of our team gives in to ethical apathy, we all feel the ripple effect.

Ethics goes much deeper than right and wrong. It goes much deeper than not harming your patient. At the heart of ethics is the idea of taking a step back to realize the unique opportunity that sits across from you in the dental chair. A once in a lifetime opportunity to finally make a difference.

So what does this all look like? How do we win the war of ethical priority?

First, it requires a gut check. Some soul-searching. Whether it was the years of hard work in the classroom or the way you felt after delivering your first denture, we all have our stories of why we do what we do. Remember those stories. Hold onto them in the back of your mind as living reminders, to reach out to in your times of ethical struggle.

And then remember the nation-wide network of dentists that are all going through the same thing, experiencing the same hardships and working through the same dilemmas. Tap into that resource. Because the close-knit network doesn't have to end with dental school or ASDA. It continues on into practice. From rural communities to big cities, from Washington to Alabama,

we are one team. And we are on each other's side, willing to help with ethical struggles should one of our teammates ever need it.

At the end of the day, this is not about success. It's not about lifestyle or essays or winning awards. It's about upholding the integrity of who we are.

We are dentistry.

And we all need those occasional reminders of why we are who we are and why we do what we do. As one nation-wide team, we can actually change the world. Sure, dentistry is about fillings and dentures and wax-ups and emergence profile. But at the heart of it all is one undeniable truth . . .

None of it matters without ethics.