

An Ethical Imperative

The recent graduation of the first class at the University of Nevada School of Dental Medicine should have been a proud moment for the students and administration, but it was marred by a scandal involving alleged cheating in the completion of requirements for graduation. Ten students were identified as having allegedly forged instructor approval of required procedures. Surprisingly, the students were allowed to graduate but their diplomas were withheld pending an investigation of the allegations and penalization of those found guilty.

A similar event occurred at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, a school that has been plagued by accusations of fiscal mismanagement and faces potential loss of its accreditation. In this institution there were 18 students who were accused of trading credits for work completed either to help their classmates graduate or, in some cases, selling the credits.

As onerous as these allegations are, these are only two of the schools that face this problem today. In discussion with educators from institutions within our state, the problem of cheating within the schools is a pervasive and a significant one. One of the basic rights in this country is that anyone who is accused of misconduct should have the right to due process to hear the evidence with punishment appropriate to the action. That is not a debatable concept. Nor should cheating in professional school or any other educational environment be debatable. Those found guilty should be

punished appropriately.

Arguably there could be mitigating circumstances that might engender such nefarious behavior. Ever-increasing academic requirements with multiple difficult courses challenge even the most brilliant of our students. Couple that with numerous and diverse clinical requirements and potential difficulty in completing the procedures necessary for graduation and there exists continual pressure on the student who most often lacks control of their patient care environment.

Others have suggested that cultural values bring altered ethical standards for subsets of the student population. Some have commented that generational values are changing and that contemporary students might view educational deceitfulness rational when more traditional individuals find it reprehensible. It is difficult to justify any actions that are less than honest under any circumstances.

Dentistry is a cottage industry with individuals who practice alone, unsupervised, and unchecked. Acceptable treatment rendered to patients is limited by patient desire and finances, and is not overseen at any level by peers. Unlike physicians who tend to use hospitals with extensive quality assurance review systems in place, dentists answer to no other professionals. Absent peer review claims or lawsuits, little that is done in dental offices is ever evaluated.

Ethical behavior can be defined as what you do when no one is looking. These



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students are unethical at this stage in their career and there is little reason to believe that their value system will change once they are out of school. What they did was blatantly wrong and inexcusable.

A licensing board that grants a license to a student who is guilty of cheating to complete school or, ethically worse, any school that grants a diploma to such a student is compromising the standards of our profession. If students cheat to get through requirements one can only assume that they might do dentistry that is not necessary, or convince patients to agree to a high-priced treatment plan when a less-expensive and equally efficacious plan would be acceptable. Similarly, they could be capable of fraud by billing for services that are over classified or never performed.

The two dental schools that have been accused in these scandals are only examples of a problem that pervades society. Recent events in corporate America have brought a wry definition to the oxymoron of business ethics. There is no circumstance under which we can even begin to allow such attitudes in a profession that is based on, and has been for so many years, a model of fidelity to the public.

Dentistry is a noble profession that inherently has been given the public trust. As a profession, we are responsible for policing ourselves and the actions of our colleagues. Any of our students or members who cannot be honest within these parameters should not be allowed to practice. **No exceptions.** ■■■■