ETHICS — Dentistry’s Challenge

by Alvin Rosenblum DDS

Whether we like to acknowledge it or not, a potential flood tide of unethical and unprofessional conduct threatens to inundate dentistry. The responsibility for enforcing higher standards rests squarely and equally upon all of us. The recent spate of damaging headlines — the expose’ on CBS “60 Minutes” comes quickly to mind — should be of serious concern to all ethical practitioners who value not only the trust of their own patients but also the public’s perception of dentistry as a compassionate and honorable profession.

In the teaching of professional ethics, a major goal is to assist students in reaching an awareness of their own moral perspective. Once those beliefs are strongly established the next challenge is to match one’s personal moral credo to one’s professional conduct. Consistency in achieving that end defines integrity, and for dentistry it also defines our CDA Code of Ethics.

We now invest the Judicial Council with responsibility for enforcement of the code and, when possible, for the prevention of violations. Those obligations, together with the council’s continuing review, code interpretation and the resolution of difficult issues raised by the component ethics committees, make a prodigious task. In general the council has met its mandate with a high degree of success. However, its recently retired chairperson, Bill King, concedes that the council’s efforts have been only “a finger in the dike” in stemming the ever-growing torrent of violations.

It is clearly wrong and evasive to expect an ethics committee of a Judicial Council to police a profession as vast and as complex as our own. No, the bulk of this responsibility is ours. Perhaps the best way for each of us to accept this responsibility is to acknowledge that all of us consciously or otherwise have been guilty of violating our own principles on occasion. We must avoid the hypocrisy of denial of our own faults and the subsequent condemnation of others.

A failure to see the ethical implications of our own behavior often leads to subconscious defense mechanisms. We appease our consciences with the rationale that “everyone does it” or that “it’s not all that important.” We simply do not want to acknowledge a breach of our own ethical beliefs either in our personal or professional lives.

The admission of wrongdoing invokes the inevitable presence of conscience. Whether we realize it or not, we always pay a price for any incongruity between behavior and moral values.

Why does one behave unethically? More often than not the reason is that it serves our immediate self-interest, i.e.: greater income, or to avoid accountability.

Unfortunately, one of the most common errors in deciding to act unethically is to overestimate the cost of doing the right thing. Clearly, an ethical act may result in material loss, but it also achieves lasting intangible benefits: self esteem, the respect of others, a clear conscience and good reputation.

Correct and ethical behavior is essential for dentistry to survive and flourish as an independent profession during a time of ever-encroaching government regulations and interference in the health sciences.

I most strongly believe that only when we clean our own houses as individuals will we be able, as a profession, to deal effectively with the ever-growing numbers of scoundrels and malpractitioners. I see the following as the major challenges.

1. We must learn more about ethics. It is a discipline like any other and requires a solid theoretical base. Truth-telling, justice, autonomy, beneficence, gratitude, mercy and reparation are the principles that govern all relationships in society.

2. We must face our own behavior to be certain that self-interest does not outweigh the interests of others, and most particularly, our patients.

3. We must encourage better instruction in ethics not only in our dental schools but also among those in practice.

4. We must involve ourselves more actively in our dental associations and participate in the efforts of the component ethics committees.

5. We must know, understand, and act in accordance with our profession’s Code of Ethics.

6. We must encourage non-member colleagues to join and participate in organized dentistry.

7. We must always hold first in our mind the nobility of our profession and the value of the service it affords to our patients as individuals and to society at large.
Ethical Issues in the Practice of Dentistry

A New Course in Professional Ethics
Alvin B. Rosenblum, D.D.S.

Ethics is the study of good and evil, of right and wrong, of duty and obligation in human conduct and of reasoning and choice about them.

Hastings Center

Lately a more open concern for morality and traditional values has led to a renewed interest in teaching ethics in professional schools. Dentistry, following a period of rapid growth in knowledge and power, is now experiencing great difficulties. Historically, efforts to introduce ethics teaching in the professional schools has met with at best indifference, at worst hostile resistance. One response to the problems that are occurring has been the call for the teaching of ethics.

During the 19th century, moral philosophy was at the center of all undergraduate education. After the turn of the century, instruction in ethics has been confined almost entirely to departments of philosophy and religion. In the past ten years, however, the interest in teaching ethics at all levels has seen resurgence.

For the past several years the CDA's Judicial Council in cooperation with representatives of each of the five California dental schools have met as STEDS (Subcommittee on Teaching Professional Ethics in Dentistry). They have recommended guidelines that led to curriculum development in ethics here at USC. It was decided by the curriculum committee that development should be undertaken by the Department of Practice Dynamics under the direction of Dr. Charles Goldstein.

Dr. Goldstein asked me, as a part-time faculty member in his department, to develop such a course. I have worked on this course development for the past year and a half. Much of the course content was gathered and organized using a system analysis process called the Crawford Slip Method. By this method material was gathered from dental educators, dentists, dental students and leaders of organized dentistry. The first meeting of the course "Ethical Issues in the Practice of Dentistry" took place on May 1st of this year.

We are dealing with a very difficult subject about which there is much disagreement. Some question whether ethics can be taught to young adults at all. They argue that one either has morality or lacks it, gaining early in childhood the strength of conviction needed to translate personal values into practice. Others argue that values emerge over a long period of our lives. Our course will be directed to the vast majority of the students who have solid values or an emerging value system that can be enhanced by defining the problems and helping them decide in advance what is the best way to behave.

As with any other subject, argument from a sound theoretical base is necessary. We hope to help the students develop the tools by which they can evaluate a given quandary and come to a decision about their behavior that will be the most beneficial to all concerned. The course will provide skills in the handling of moral argument and will help students develop a logical process for achieving their own judgements.

According to Aristotle, the will to act in a moral way is a matter of practice. The students will gain practice by debating case studies in seminars with experienced professionals. Such cases will connect the practical with abstract theory. In addition, many outstanding representatives of our profession will have the opportunity to serve as role models in these seminar sessions.

Professional ethics is bound to the principle of service that originates from religious ideals. The dentist needs to be more than a dispenser of technical services. He/she must be an educator and a partner in the pursuit of better health. We consider this course to be an introduction to what must become a lifelong effort along the same line.

Introduction to Dentistry

Young students shown touring the USC School of Dentistry. They are accompanied by their teacher. One teacher is the father of Pat Casey, a sophomore dental student. The USC dental school welcomes all students to visit — a wonderful introduction to a career in dentistry.