

Ethical Dilemmas and Issues Faced by the Pedodontist's In Their Clinical Practice in India- A Cross Sectional Study.

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Abstract

In the modernized era of the dental practice, numerous set of principles contribute in establishing codes of ethics which are based on ethical principles, the system of beliefs and social and cultural considerations, which help in guiding the dental practitioners in their regular dental practice as well as establish expectations for dentists in fulfilling their ethical and professional duties towards their profession. This article gives an overview of the ethical problems faced by pediatric postgraduates in their clinical practice through different scenarios presented to them.

Keywords: Dental ethics, dentist-patient relationship, ethical principles.

Introduction

Ethics is an intrinsic component of the dental practice derived from the Greek word "ethos," which means

character or conduct. It is the philosophy of human conduct, a way of stating and evaluating principles by which problems of behavior can be solved. It is concerned with the evaluation of human conduct and standards, and judging whether the actions are right or wrong.¹

Ethics helps to support autonomy and self-determination and to protect the vulnerable and promote the welfare and equality of human beings. An ethical dentist-patient relationship is based on trust, honesty, confidentiality, privacy and the quality of care.²

The ethical issues faced by dentists in today's society have become more complicated than earlier and seem to arise more often than those faced by dentists in the past. Dentists have a dual role, being at the same time health professionals and individuals running a business

enterprise. In each role, they are confronted with specific and conflicting ethical demands.^{3,4}

Dental Ethics is a moral obligation that encompasses professional conduct and judgment imposed by the members of the dental profession. The dentists (Code of Ethics) regulations were laid down by the Dental Council of India (DCI) in 1976, and later it was revised in the year 2014. Every registered dentist must read these regulations, understand his responsibilities, and abide by the same.⁵ Though dental ethics is an unwritten code, there are specific guidelines that have been laid down for information of members of the profession. In India, the Dental Council of India (DCI) is the statutory body entailed with maintaining ethics among dental professionals. The code of ethics for dentists enumerates duties and rights of a dental practitioner.^{6,7}

Dental professionals today often encounter ethical dilemmas, as deciding on the best dental treatment has become more a matter of respecting the conclusion of the patient than professional paternalism. A dilemma is a complicated situation necessitating a choice between two equally undesirable alternatives. Ethical dilemmas arise from fundamental conflicts among ethical beliefs, duties, principles, and theories.⁸

However, dental ethics seems to be still in its infancy in many countries. Exploratory studies on ethical issues of dental practice could hardly be found in the literature. What is probably required is for dental professionals themselves to raise issues about dental ethics to sensitize the profession and help clarify the problems. Analyzing the ethical concerns of dentists may provide a basis for more fruitful and timely ethical discussions within the dental profession.⁹ The principles of ethics are as follows-

1. Non-maleficence (To do no harm): Practitioners should not harm his patients.

2. Beneficence (To do good): Attempts must be made to maximize the benefits and minimize the harm.

3. Veracity or truthfulness: The doctor-patient relationship is based on trust; failure of this can result in disrespect to the patient and threatens the relationship.

4. Autonomy: This principle says that health care professionals respect the patients' right to decide on the treatment plan.

5. Justice: The primary duty of the health professional is to serve the patient irrespective of class, creed, race, nationality, social class differences, etc. (No discrimination among patients).

6. Confidentiality: All records of the patient regarding illness, investigations, communications, treatment, and history are kept confidential and are not disclosed to others without authorization from the patient.¹⁰

Materials and Methods

A cross-sectional survey was conducted in the national conference of Pedodontics and Preventive dentistry, India, in November 2019 with the ethical approval obtained from the organizing secretary of the conference.

Only postgraduates from the Department of Pedodontics and Preventive Dentistry from all over the country were included in the study.

After explaining the purpose of the study and obtaining voluntary informed consent, a self-administered, self-designed questionnaire containing five scenarios was given to the participants. A total of 100 subjects agreed to participate in the study.

The questionnaire included five sets of questions to assess the participant's knowledge of ethics and its application in practice. It consisted of a set of five scenarios to evaluate the various ethical contentions faced by them. Each participant was given 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire, after which it was collected by the investigator.

Results

A total of 100 postgraduates from first to final year participated in the study.

In the case of scenario 1, 77% of participants think the dentist had violated the principle of truthfulness, and 53% of participants believe what the dentist has done was not right.

In the case of scenario 2, 32%, 39%, and 29% of participants believed that dentists had violated the principle of beneficence, justice, and autonomy, respectively, and 82% of the participants felt that dentists should not have undergone extraction of both the teeth.

In scenario 3, 14% of the participants agreed that Dr. Nitish was right in giving his friend priority over other patients, and 86% of participants disagreed with the fact.

According to 29%, 10%, 61% of the participants, Dr. Nitish had breached the principle of beneficence, confidentiality, and justice, respectively.

In scenario 4, 92% of participants felt that Dr. Vishal should have taken the complete history of the patient's systemic illness and needed precautions before extraction, and 91% of the participants thought that what the dentist did was not right.

In scenario 5, 12% think that the new dentist should inform the patient regarding maltreatment by the previous dentist and remove the restoration and should start with pulpectomy without telling the previous dentist. While 76% think that matter should be discussed with the patient and previous dentist.

Discussion

The American Dental Association has put forward the statement that constitutes the 'Principles of Ethics and Code of Professional Conduct.' It is our responsibility to uphold and strengthen the dental profession as a member of the learned profession.¹¹

The National Board for Certification (NBC) believes that the guidelines stated in the ethical standards are fair and reasonable and represent the desirable code of professional conduct for dental technology.¹²

The privilege of being a dentist comes with a responsibility to society and fellow members of the profession to conduct one's professional activities in a highly ethical manner.¹³

The present study was a humble effort to investigate pediatric dentist's acquiescence with dental ethics and jurisprudence and dilemmas and issues faced by them. The representation of the questionnaire on pediatric dentist and dental ethics is given below in Table I.

The patient-doctor relationship is based on trust. Lying to patients shows disrespect to them and thus threatening their relation. In the case of scenario 1, more than half of the participants felt that dentist had violated the principle of truthfulness, and what he did was not right.

So, to do good in this scenario, the dentist has to tell a lie, and if wanting to avoid being a liar, the dentist cannot provide the desired treatment. So, in both circumstances, the dentist is violating the ethical principle.

As the dental profession is more like a business, the competitiveness in the profession can influence negativism. In scenario 5, the dentist faced the problem of deciding the right treatment option in a maltreated case. Most dentists do not like to disparage their fellow dentists. The primary duty of the dental professional is to serve the patients irrespective of class, creed, etc. Justice demands that each person should be treated equally. But at times it becomes challenging to balance the personal and professional relationships and this what happened in scenario 3, very fewer people felt that dentist was right in giving priority to his friend over other patients and the majority of people felt that dentist had violated the ethical principle.

Fear of losing a single patient in this world full of competitiveness at times takes a wrong turn. Complete knowledge of medical history is a must for the dentist as well as for the patients. In scenario 4, the dentist blindly started with the treatment sought by the patient without informing him about the consequences. More than 90% of participants felt what the dentist did was utterly unethical and maleficence towards a patient's life.

Table 1: Questionnaire for Pediatric Dentist's On Dental Ethics

Your gender

Scenario 1- Aditya, an 11-year-old boy, went for his first dental checkup. He had an unsalvageable mandibular first molar that caused him severe pain, and the dentist planned to extract it. Aditya was apprehensive, so he asked the dentist "what he was going to do." The dentist did not want to upset him, so he said: "he is just going to look into his mouth."

Which ethical principle did the dentist violate?

- i) Beneficence ii) Autonomy iii) Truthfulness

Do you think the doctor did the right thing?

YES NO

Scenario 2- A 13-year-old child with a history of cardiac myopathy was referred to an oral surgeon for the extraction of the badly decayed first molar. The adjacent second molar, too, had a sizeable carious lesion but was restorable. The parent requested the surgeon to extract both the teeth and also to prescribe antibiotics.

The surgeon knew that antibiotics were not at all necessary and also that unnecessary extraction would complicate the case. Considering these facts, the doctor decided to extract only the first molar.

Which ethical principle did the doctor breach?

- i. Beneficence ii. Justice iii. Autonomy

B.) Do you think that doctor should have gone ahead with the extraction of both teeth?

- i. Yes ii. No iii. Dilemma/ not able to decide

Scenario 3- A private dental practitioner, Dr. Nitish (Pediatric dentist), was a renowned dentist, and many patients visited his clinic from neighboring cities. One day, his childhood friend visited his clinic with his daughter for her dental treatment. Many patients had been waiting to see Dr. Nitish for a long time, but his friend entered his chamber first.

Was Dr. Nitish right in giving his friend priority over the other patients in line?

YES NO

B) Which ethical principle did Dr. Nitish breach i) Beneficence ii) Confidentially iii) Justice

Scenario 4 -Ayush, who was 12 years old, visited a private dental clinic with his father for the Ortho treatment. Since there was so much crowding, so Dr. Vishal decided to extract all 4 premolars. Dr. Vishal learned through his investigations that Ayush was suffering from juvenile diabetes. He went ahead and extracted the teeth without informing the patient about the pros and cons of extraction in diabetic patients or prescribing any medication for it.

Do you think Dr. Vishal did the right thing?

YES NO

Do you think that Dr. Vishal should have taken the needed precautions before the extraction of the teeth in this systemic condition?

YES NO NOT ABLE TO DECIDE

Scenario 5- Mrs. Kumar regularly took her daughter 5 years old to the neighbor for all his oral health care needs. She went to see him when her daughter developed pain in a tooth that was restored a week.

However, her dentist was on leave, so she went to another dentist. The new dentist examined the tooth, and he discovered caries with pulp involvement in the X-ray.

The new dentist should;

Inform the patient about the maltreatment by the previous dentist.

Remove the restoration and should start with pulpectomy without informing the patient.

Discuss the matter both with the patient and the previous dentist.

In the dental profession, it is difficult at times to decide which ethical principle to follow. The ethical principle is meant to guide the healthcare provider to serve humanity.

As there is a hairline difference between the various principles, the following one can mean violating another.

This results in moral distress, which has been defined as knowing the ethically correct thing to do but feeling unable to act. Indeed, research suggests that moving one's conscience at work can have several severe consequences for individuals and organizations. The consequences include (i) compassion fatigue and burnout among health care personnel; (ii) decrease in an individual's level of empathy, and avoiding or withdrawing from patients; (iii) decreased quality of service in terms of patient's safety, patient's experience and effectiveness of care; and (iv) deterioration in the general health and well-being of staff, with high staff turnover rates and staff shortages.

There exists a need to teach professional ethics in dentistry, and the appropriate goals for teaching professional ethics have been identified.

To sensitize student dentists to the moral dimensions of professional life and practice.

To develop in student dentists, the skills of ethical analysis.

To foster in student dentists respect for disagreement and toleration of ambiguity.

To assist students in explicating the moral responsibilities incurred in becoming a member of the profession of dentistry.

To motivate the student dentists continued learning in the field of professional ethics.

To further advance our understanding of the ethical aspects of dentistry, there is a need for more comprehensive studies of ethical issues arising in dental practice. In light of these studies we can find whether ethical dilemmas encountered by dentists differ in developed and developing countries. They would also be a prerequisite to develop strategies for tailored clinical ethics in dentistry.

Conclusion

Considering the response got from the postgraduates regarding how to deal with the ethical dilemmas were on the vast varying scale, a majority of them were unaware of the ethical principles. The ethical issues about which dentists show greater concern are those more connected to the clinical aspects of dental practice. The dentist must conduct his or her professional life following the ethical principles rooted in the moral rules and to maintain his or her level of knowledge and skills. These are the principles of beneficence, autonomy, and justice, in both individual and societal contexts.

Taking into account, the lack of awareness of the ethical principles among the majority of dental practitioners, specific programs, and events should be conducted to promote knowledge of ethics. It is essential to incorporate ethical standards in daily dental practice. It is needed to provide appropriate training methods in the dental profession for continuing towards acceptable ethical behavior in dentistry.

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