

# COMMENTARY

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## Compassionate care



### BACKGROUND

You've graduated after years of hard work and sacrifice and are eager to meet colleagues, become familiar with them, and avail yourself for future patient referrals. You reach out and schedule times to meet with each—but you experience discouragement and a decided lack of caring. What is the problem?

### ANALYSIS

As was addressed in Dionne Warwick's ageless hit from 1966, "What the World Needs Now is Love," there is definitely a lack of compassion and empathy in the responses you've received from fellow dentists. In bioethics, not only do the principles or guidelines help to shape moral behavior, but they also address virtue ethics. Virtues are socially valuable characteristics that positively describe an individual's being rather than principles or rules that guide behavior. Compassion is such a virtue that involves the desire to improve others' situations and is described as a feeling *for* rather than a feeling *with* the other individuals. Empathy is the ability to live with or share another's experience, whether it's positive or negative. Out of empathy, one can develop compassion for another person.

Health care providers should have the attributes of compassion and empathy to properly care for their patients. Whether these are present has come into question.

### RESEARCH RESULTS

A study used the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) to determine the levels of empathy exhibited by 13,737 subjects in 72 samples of American college students between 1979 and 2009. The results indicate that the levels of empathy decreased by

40% over that time period. Perspective taking was also measured, referring to the proclivity of an individual to adapt to another person's perspective. It also declined significantly. Women tended to be more empathetic than men, whites were less empathetic than minorities, and social status had no relationship to the level of empathy manifested.

Although the results of a single study are insufficient to make definitive statements, they can spur health care providers to consider whether they need to be more empathetic and compassionate. When considering this, care providers should include their interactions with not just patients but also everyone else they meet in their daily lives.

#### Clinical Significance

Without putting ourselves in others' shoes it can be difficult to understand what their problems are and what they need to have a more positive situation, or at least a more positive response to their situation. Recognizing the struggles of others should help us develop compassion and act accordingly. We need to care about one another—and that includes everyone.

Greco PM: What the world needs now . . . *Am J Orthod Dentofacial Orthop* 155:164, 2019

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