

CRITICISM

Justifiable criticism and reporting a colleague



BACKGROUND

Sometimes dentists are called on to cover for another dentist and will be given the opportunity to assess the quality of oral health care that has been delivered. If that care appears to be questionable or clearly substandard, the question can arise as to whether a colleague should be reported to a state or constituent society. Making the decision to report a colleague can be difficult, but the American Dental Association Principles of Ethics and Code of Professional Conduct (ADA Code) can provide guidance.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Justice, Justifiable Criticism, Patient Autonomy, and Veracity

The principle of justice or fairness states that dental professionals have a duty to treat patients, colleagues, and society fairly. The section on justifiable criticism clearly identifies the reporting of gross or continual poor treatment by other dental professionals as a situation that dentists are obligated to report. Balancing these 2 are the obligation to ensure that patients are informed about their oral health status without speaking disparagingly of colleagues and the obligation to exercise care that any comments made to the patient are truthful, informed, and justifiable.

If at all possible, the first step in making a report about questionable care is to make the previous treating dentist aware of the justifiable criticism to ensure that all parties understand the circumstances and conditions under which the treatment was performed. Under the principle of patient autonomy, the patient has the right to be informed about the current state of his or her oral health and why the recommendations of the referred dentist differ from those of the previous dentist. Patients should be fully informed of the proposed treatment as well as reasonable alternatives so that they can participate in the decision-making process for treatment planning.

Nonmalficence and Veracity

Dentists are also bound by the principle of nonmalficence, or doing no harm, to refrain from causing pain and suffering to the

patient. If the referred dentist ignores the previous dentist's work, harm could be caused to the patient.

Dentists must communicate truthfully to their colleagues as well as to the patient. It's important to have a clear understanding of the reasons for a particular treatment being done. Dentists need to also clearly and truthfully explain the patient's current oral health and what they know of the patient overall.

RESULTS

If the results of these actions appear to support reporting a dental colleague for performing poor or unethical dental care, the dentist should bring the matter to the appropriate state or local dental society. Dentists are called upon to uphold the highest ethical standards and to consider the patient's benefit as their primary goal.

Clinical Significance

It can be very difficult to handle situations where you become aware that a colleague may have provided substandard or unethical dental treatment for a patient. However, as members of the ADA, dentists are obligated to uphold the principles outlined in the ADA Code in order to maintain the public's trust in the dental profession.

Jonke G: Justifiable criticism and its ethical considerations. *J Am Dent Assoc* 149:924-925, 2018

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