

White Paper on Professionalism and Dentistry

Submitted by the Task Force on Professionalism, American College of Dentists

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Dentistry at a Tipping point: Are we at the end of our time as a Profession?

Challenges abound in Dentistry. We see the ever-present commoditization of care. We have an increasing commercial focus in practice where patient care and proper treatment planning is often secondary to monetary goals. We have younger colleagues saddled with hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt coming out of school. We have self-proclaimed social internet dental gurus giving clinical advice without evidence-based backing. We see the continued influence of industry and insurance companies on basic patient care decisions. Additionally, we are two years into a global pandemic, which has challenged our profession in ways we have never seen before: hiring shortages, new airborne precaution protocols, increased governmental regulations, increased PPE requirements. As a profession, we are at a tipping point. Is this where Dentistry transitions from a Profession to a Trade? Where we see care as an exchange of services with increased governmental regulation, and a sole focus on profit over patient well-being?

The challenges are real but there is reason to retain an optimistic perspective. CODA standards continue to highlight Ethics and Professionalism training as a required component of training in Dental schools and Residency programs. These programs are actively working to incorporate ethics education and evaluation into students' didactic and clinical training. Additionally, the Students, Ethics and Professionalism Association (SPEA), founded in 2007, has matured into a strong and impactful national organization with local chapters in most of our country's dental schools. SPEA is also closely aligned with the American College of Dentists. Our future is hopeful with our younger colleagues. Yet, can the same be said for our early-career dentists, mid-career dentists and the more mature senior dentists?

Looking to the pandemic as an example of the tenacity of our Profession, again there is much to be hopeful about. Dentistry responded with vigor to the challenges the Pandemic continues to throw at us. We came together to develop best practices to ensure patient and staff safety. We promoted the importance of Dentistry as an Essential Health Care service to both the government and the public. We continued to diligently provide timely care to our patients, even when many of our offices were closed, via teledentistry.

In light of the real challenges we face, how can we continue to remind ourselves of the importance of being a Professional, as well as, what being a Professional requires of us as Dentists? Let's consider the word PROFESSION, literally, as a means of providing guidance to keep us true to ourselves as a patient-centered Profession:

P: Practice Altruism – put the patient’s interests first at all times.

R: Respect and Responsibility – treat others as you would like to be treated, take responsibility for all of your actions, not just the good ones.

O: Open to all – treat everyone without bias or prejudice, even if they differ from you.

F: Fidelity – remember and honor the fact that patients and colleagues/staff both trust and put their confidence in you.

E: Empathy and Excellence – put yourself in your patients’ shoes, remember to respect their perspectives to allow for excellence in practice.

S: Social Contract –we have a duty as professionals to respect the patients’ trust in us, maintain competence and to inform them of the treatment we are doing and why we are proposing to do it.

S: Self-Regulation – the cornerstone of being a professional, we must take this responsibility with utmost seriousness. If asked to participate in Peer Review, we must partake.

I: Integrity – keep Ethics and Humanism at the core of your patient care philosophy.

O: Oath – use the ADA Code and Oath of the Professions as a resource for guidance and centering in times of ethical question or challenge.

N: Never stop Learning – embrace life-long learning for the benefit of your patients. Competence is a core part of being a professional.

The use of this simple construct can serve as a quick reference and simple reminder of the things we, as Professionals, should always keep first and foremost to best serve our patients and society. We must all work vigorously to keep Dentistry a Profession and prevent its devolution to a Trade.

What would Dentists lose if Dentistry was no longer a Profession? What values does being a Profession provide Dentists?

We have all taken Ethics classes in dental school and through our local dental societies. We understand the critical concepts of the ADA Code, the underlying tenet of always “putting patients first” and the main Ethical Principles we are asked to abide by to best serve our patients. It is also important to remember that being a Profession benefits each one of us as individual dentists. Let’s discuss a few important ways this is so.

Dentists are given the privilege of self-regulation through our Social Contract with the public. This is an enormous responsibility, no doubt. However, it is one that comes with the benefit of dentists being able to assess matters of technical skill/knowledge about their work and practices that only dentists know. This is skill/knowledge we received by virtue of our training in dental school, post-graduate work and life-long learning/continuing education. Should dentistry cease to be a profession, we will no longer be allowed this privilege and instead lay people (be they the government or other non-dental organizations) will be the ones to regulate our work. This means people, who lack the technical knowledge we learned and utilize every day, will be making the critical decisions on how we should practice day in, and day out be it in the treatments we provide or how our offices are run.

If Dentistry was to cease being a profession, we would no longer be expected to abide by a code of ethics or hold a fiduciary relationship with our patients; this establishes the path towards a purely commercial interaction with the patient being our customer. The driving factor to that type of relationship with our patients would be an exchange of services or goods and the monies involved in such a transaction. Patients will look to us like they look to stores, simply as a place to buy and receive a service or good. What will be removed from the equation is our obligation to put patients first as well as concepts of accountability and responsibility. Patients will approach us with the “buyer-beware” mindset, knowing we no longer have an obligation to put their needs over our own.

Another thing that would change if Dentistry is no longer a profession is that it will affect how the public, our patients, view us. Central to this paradigm shift is the concept of respect. This can range from the loss of such “ego”-boosting perks as being called “Doctor” (and having it mean something) to loss of leadership positions we may no longer be openly offered in our communities be it on school boards, coaching youth sports, etc., by virtue of our being a dentist. Patients may also think nothing of cancelling appointments or failing to show up if they do not respect our time. One other area where respect could also diminish is between colleagues. The concept of Justifiable Criticism will be lost as dentists will face no repercussions for saying unduly critical remarks or making questionable critiques about other dentists’ work.

One last area to consider is if dentistry becomes a full-fledge commercial commodity/venture, and not a profession, we will then be practicing in an environment that is drastically different from what we know today. For example, we could see the rise of Chain Store dentistry or “menu” type dental care focused solely on profit rather than need. Patients too may gain greater skepticism in their dental care knowing dentists are “selling” discretionary dental services as opposed to treating their essential dental health needs. And, in cases of public health emergency, if Dentistry is no longer seen as an essential part of healthcare, then Dentists will not receive priority funding, PPE distribution and our doors could be kept shut for extended periods of time.

Dentistry is a profession. We, us dentists, must remember this is not only beneficial for our patients but it is beneficial for us as well. With this win-win, we owe it to our patients and to our colleagues to do everything we can to keep Dentistry's Professional status.

Respectfully submitted by:

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