

Looking Inward

Determining What Professionalism and
Self-Formation Mean to Us

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This is our 30th *AGD Impact* essay on professional ethics in dentistry. Most of our essays have focused on ethical challenges that general dentists face in their relationships with patients in daily practice; others looked at relationships between the dentist and other dentists; and still others on relationships with office staff. Our reflections on these challenges required both of us to look inward to determine what professionalism means to us. Hopefully, many readers have also found themselves looking inward to judge whether our reflections connected with their experiences of what dental professionalism requires in their lives and practices.

We have not focused specifically, though, on what this looking inward process involves — that is, how do we judge our reflections compared to those of others? Why is this important to the daily practice of dentistry? And what good does dentistry ultimately offer society?

In the first 29 essays, we have simply presumed that this looking inward process is important to professionalism. It seems time now to reflect on what it entails in order to spark some insight into how dentists can and do grow in professionalism. This does not come from simply thinking about this patient or that office challenge or reading an essay or two, in isolation from the rest of one's professional life. Experienced coaches and teachers know that nurturing good sportsmanship and/or thinking habits requires time, practice, and experience. It is no different with the development of good clinical skills and the excellent ethical thinking habits needed to use them masterfully. People naturally learn what they practice and focus on. This process is natural, so while philosophy, psychology, and other natural sciences can help explain the mechanisms, there is some truth to the common comment: "I don't think ethics can be taught." What is easily overlooked in this comment, though, is the critical importance of practicing professional ethics deliberately every day — thinking daily about how we practice today fits into the long-term process of developing our professionalism as fully as we can.

Minimalist and Aspirational Interpretations

Another comment often heard about professionalism is that it is hard to define. "I know it when I see it" is a common refrain, but describing it is another matter. On the other hand, it's easier to see and describe professionalism when it's missing in a dentist or any other professional for that matter. Still, what is it that we see when saying we "know it when we see it"? And exactly what is missing when a professional falls short?

For one thing, these two common experiences reveal that there are two kinds of ethical standards used to evaluate professional actions. One is a minimalist interpretation of what professionalism requires; the other is an aspirational interpretation.

A minimalist interpretation judges ethical conduct as below a threshold where it is hard to think of a person's act as that of a member of a profession at all; these are actions that a member ought to recognize as inappropriate.

By contrast, an aspirational interpretation of professionalism is what we attribute to the most admirable members of a profession. Here, the focus is not on individual actions, but on patterns of acting. When we admire professionalism in the aspirational sense, our admiration is focused on that person having well-established habits of routinely perceiving, valuing, judging, and acting in almost every situation in the fullest accord with the profession's highest values and ethical standards.

Saying "in almost every situation" is important because situations can arise in which a dentist — who is admirable in this kind of aspirational way — might still, occasionally, fall short of acting in fullest accord with the highest ideals of the dental profession. But we do not need to stop thinking of this person as an admirable dentist because the focus of the aspirational meaning of professionalism is on the fruits of long-term growth. It cannot be achieved quickly or without shortfalls along the way. So, while professionalism in this aspirational sense is something that dental students and newly practicing dentists should be aware of and value working toward, it would certainly be inappropriate for us to expect that the goal or fruit of this aspiration could be achieved so soon. Students and newly practicing dentists have simply not had enough time and experience to achieve aspirational professionalism as an experienced and fully realized goal. This is one reason why dental schools find educating students in professionalism to be such a difficult task. In addition to time and experience, achieving professionalism in an aspirational sense also requires the specific kind of looking inward that we are describing.

Sometimes, dentists face ethical challenges that need the dental profession's minimalist focus. For general dentists with any length of practice experience, however, we can hope that their mastery of the essentials of dental professional ethics — and their having established habits of practice that embody these essentials — means that uncertainty about how to fulfill professionalism's minimalist requirements occurs only in unusual situations. In such cases, looking inward is usually pretty straightforward; that is, "If I do B or C rather than A, can I really call myself an ethical dentist at all?"

The looking inward that contributes to aspirational professionalism, in contrast, is more complex. It involves two kinds of skill sets — both of which must become habitual practices if a person's growth toward aspirational professionalism is ever going to be dependable. One skill set is a thought process most people use from time to time when trying to determine if an action they are considering



“Heraclitus, philosopher, 535–475 BC, wrote, ‘Good character is not formed in a week or a

month. It is created little by little, day by day. Protracted and patient effort is needed to develop good character.’ Ethics and good character are siblings who grow up together. We always ‘reap what we sow.’”

—Roger D. Winland, DDS, MS, MAGD, Editor

is what they should do in that situation. There are a number of ways in which people determine what they ought to do; this particular skill set is just one of them. It does not have a common name, so we will call it “person-to-admired-person comparison.” We will first describe how it works in an ordinary situation, then how it can help in the growth of aspirational professionalism.

Person-to-Admired-Person Comparison

Have you ever tried to decide what you should do by thinking about someone whom you admired and then asking yourself: “Is this what this person would do in a situation like this?” It might seem that what we are asking is: “What action did he or she do in situations like this?” But, in reality, we are focusing on the kind of person the admired person is or was — not necessarily the specific outcome or reaction she or he displayed. Note that the person being imitated does not have to be admirable in every respect for this process to make sense as a way of determining how we should act. In fact, in our ordinary lives, our admiration is often limited to a certain aspect of the admired person; our imitating this person will in practice, then, be limited as well.

A person who wants to grow in aspirational professionalism needs to employ this same person-to-admired-person thought process more self-consciously

than people who use it occasionally in their daily lives. They need to be on the lookout for admirable dentists, and they need to compare the kinds of professionals these admired dentists are with how they themselves practice, both technically and in the relationships that are involved in dental practice. This needs to be an ongoing activity that eventually becomes a habit in which the dentist is able to learn from every other dentist.

Forming Oneself in Aspirational Professionalism

The second skill set for building aspirational professionalism is learning how to gain the characteristics we admire in other dentists. Two specific concepts are important in being able to do this: 1) habituation and 2) beginning with specific, learnable parts (of the larger whole we aim to master).

Because their practice of these characteristics is grounded in well-established habits in the technical, ethical and value-based aspects of dental practice, it can appear to the rest of us that acting admirably is done without any real effort. In order to do this ourselves, we may need to focus on only one aspect at a time and, then, by determined repetition and self-assessment — with self-criticism and self-correction (or self-commendation as appropriate) — practice and master the components of real dental professionalism.

The key to forming the habits that constitute aspirational professionalism is to make sure that the actions we repeat are the right ones. This is where self-assessment comes in. For each characteristic of professionalism that we admire, we need to regularly stop and honestly examine how we are acting in that respect. If we are acting in accord with what we admire, deliberate repetition is in order until we barely have to notice that this is how we want to act. If our assessment tells us our actions are not in accord, what is called for from us is not guilt. Rather, what is needed is an imaginative reconstruction of the action — and deliberateness about focusing on it and adopting it — so the next time our action will be what we want.

Habit formation, of course, is also just common sense. And, as with any habit we want to develop, our self-assessments have to be conducted frequently and regularly, at the end of each day, for example, and only if they are

3 STEPS TO SELF-FORMATION

Three activities are essential components of the process of self-formation in aspirational professionalism:

1. Deliberately repeating admired actions
2. Constructively (vs. guilt-focused) self-assessing and self-correcting
3. Making efforts to develop mutual collegial support relationships with one’s peers

done for positive reasons. This is because we are striving for something valuable — not out of avoiding guilt at the unavoidable gradualness of our progress. Moreover, if such constructive self-assessments become a regular part of daily life, it is likely we will develop a habit of constructive self-assessment, so we will do this self-assessment, too, with greater ease and naturalness.

In addition, the experienced practitioner has a potential advantage in this process — an advantage that is rarely available to the dental student who must be focused on developing multiple new skills. The experienced practitioner may already have, or can easily identify, peers who are committed to the same goal. In this case, the self-formation process can receive collegial support, shared insight, and (if the bond of collegiality is strong enough) possible mutual guidance and even correction. This is particularly helpful for dentists who are seeking exemplars of aspirational professionalism to observe and imitate. One's own circle may not have a rich supply of particularly admirable people, or exemplars, with the particular characteristics of professionalism that a dentist might judge he or she needs most to learn. But that circle may have other dentists, like oneself, who aspire to grow in professionalism and who know of admirable dentists to learn from. Working together, in an atmosphere of mutual respect, is often the best way to learn a new skill. Learning the skills of aspirational professionalism is no different.

There are three activities that are essential to the process of self-formation in aspirational professionalism. All three presuppose, though, that a dentist can identify, by person-to-admired-person comparison, the characteristics of dental professionalism that he or she needs most to focus on developing: deliberate repetitions of actions in accord with that characteristic (beginning with learnable components, if the characteristic is complex, and gradually integrating them to learn the whole); constructive (vs. guilt-focused) self-assessment/self-correction/self-commendation; and efforts to develop mutual collegial support relationships with one's peers to aid the process of growing in professionalism.

Going Forward in Future Essays

As this series of essays goes forward in *AGD Impact*, we will continue identifying aspects of professionalism that deserve to be part of the process of dentists' self-formation and to offer our suggestions about how a dentist might shape her or his conduct in the best way. We will look at specific admirable characteristics, for example, that patient and professional surveys associate with professionalism and need continuous habitual development. We take it for granted, then, that each reader's own insights into how to make the best use of our words are far more important than what we say, and our essays are offered to assist in the readers' own looking inward processes. We hope that



“To provide ethical treatment means we need to create a symbiotic relationship

between our skills and the desires of our patients. . . . What's the trick in creating a successful and ethical dental practice? Listen to your patients; plan a course of action according to your clinical education; communicate your thoughts so your patient understands the process, benefits, and risks; and know that the treatment you provide is what you would give to a close family member in the same situation.”

—Timothy F. Kosinski, DDS, MAGD,
Associate Editor

this description of how those inward reflections can be deliberately structured into a process of self-formation in dental professionalism will be found useful in the same way. ♦

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