



What Is Professional and Business Ethics All About in Dentistry?

Editor's Note: *What is this professional and business ethics all about? Dr. Donald Patthoff, Dr. David Ozar, and Dr. David Sokol have recently published the third edition of Dental Ethics at Chairside: Professional Obligations and Practical Applications (Georgetown University Press, 2018). The Academy of Laser Dentistry takes a deeper dive into the ethical issues ... what they are and what they are not. In a candid interview, ALD Board of Directors member Dr. James Carreiro asks Dr. Patthoff how ethics affects professions and professionals.*

Several popular news media articles have recently ranked dentistry as one of the best professions in terms of job satisfaction and security, compensation, and career flexibility. Unlike the medical profession, the dental field has been able to maintain relative independence from government influence and control. Dentists have the freedom to make patient care decisions without adhering to rigid algorithms and they have autonomy regarding their business practices.

With these freedoms, the dentist and his/her team faces daily ethical challenges in formulating the optimal treatment plan that is beneficial and cost-effective for each patient. Recently, we had the opportunity to discuss these challenges with Dr. Donald Patthoff, co-author of *Dental Ethics at Chairside*. The following questions are excerpts from an interview on his views on why ethics plays such a key role in the daily responsibilities of a dentist.

Carreiro and Patthoff

Dr. Carreiro: Dentistry today offers more opportunities and challenges to dentists, their teams and patients than could have been imagined 50 years ago. Your book, co-authored with Dr. David Ozar and Dr. David Sokol, comes at an interesting time in our profession. Do you see your book as a road map to assist both new and established dentists on their professional journey?

Dr. Patthoff: Wow, that's a big question. Two short answers. It depends and yes.

Dr. Carreiro: I was hoping that you could say more than that. What is your recent book really about?

Dr. Patthoff: It is about professions; why society invented them, why they are at serious risk today, and why society still needs them. It uses the dental profession, so to speak, to help sink our teeth into what professions are and are not, so as to get a taste of these issues for all professions.

Dr. Carreiro: Tell us, please, what are professions and what are they not, with the focus on dentistry? How can this book be a road map for students and dentists?

Dr. Patthoff: Most people have personal experiences with dentistry; they may sense that something isn't quite professional, but still can't put their finger on what should be better. This book shows what one profession looks like; it offers key ideas, actually tools that society and professions, as well as individuals and professionals, can use to make professional relationships work better.

So, in that sense, yes, this book aims to assist new dental students and established dentists and their teams in their lifelong journey to become better professionals, pursuing excellence, and using ethics as a practical tool – just like they use their office equipment and hand instruments.

If we think of maps as a tool, then, yes, this book is a useful tool. I would hesitate to call this the only map. It is very likely, though, the most practical and useful one. This is because it is much more than theory, codes, and etiquette.

Dr. Carreiro: Have you seen a rise in ethical challenges in the profession compared to 20 years ago due to the use of social media, mobile apps, and other forms of advertising?

Dr. Patthoff: The fact that the Georgetown University Press and its business team saw a need and an opportunity to update the first two editions of *Dental Ethics at Chairside* says something about the new challenges that have come along over at least the past 10 years, much of it already starting to grow 20 years ago. So, the book describes each of these challenges you mention with little stories that relate to both past dental practices and current ones.

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Dr. Carreiro: Why are stories used to illustrate ethical issues and why are situations important in understanding behaviors?

Dr. Patthoff: Each chapter starts with a story. That story is then followed by an introduction to some well-grounded ethical thinking tool that most dentists intuitively know at some level, just from their practical experiences and common sense, but not yet in a refined enough way that can also be used in these new challenges. The book therefore identifies and clarifies these “idea tools” as dentistry’s central practice values. These central practice values are more than principles of ethics and codes of conduct. They are actually ranked values that help dentists, patients, the profession, and society work together so they can individually and in groups better apply and interpret such things as ethical principles, codes of conduct, and State practice laws for a particular matter at hand. They are desired critical thinking and deliberation habits that professions and society want to nurture for the health and well-being of patients and society.

It takes a few pages to polish the core idea. After that, toward the end of each chapter we go back to the case and look at some of the questions raised in the stories when looked at through the lens of one of the central practice values. It’s sort of a practice application to test its worth. It is also a way to have more solid footing to examine and define the next ranked core value.

Dr. Carreiro: Can you provide us with examples of how the challenges of introducing new technology such as lasers can have on treatment decisions that doctors and patients make?

Dr. Patthoff: There are many examples; just one involving lasers, though, is the ability of many devices to enhance our bodies’ natural ability to repair and regenerate. Some of the mechanisms responsible for this are similar to photosynthesis in plants – a “mammalian photosynthesis,” so to speak. Devices that have U.S. Food and Drug Administration marketing clearance for these effects, though, currently make these claims based on comparisons to heat lamps that have a long history of showing safety and effectiveness. The multiple standards for describing this “mammalian photosynthesis,” then, have not yet been set in a way that various devices can be compared. This can confuse doctors, patients, product designers, and educators when they are deciding whether the clinical effects being observed are because of heat or photosynthesis. Some may say: “Why ask? It works and has worked for a long time.” Others might counter with: “We need more evidence.” Or, “Show me the evidence.”

Dr. Carreiro: Where is the connection between scientifically controlled studies, clinical experience, and the impact on patient treatment decisions?

Dr. Patthoff: Dr. David Chambers wrote a classic article on that topic in 2002. It was republished in the *Journal of the American College of Dentists* in 2014. In short, he focuses on the role of practical wisdom and clinical experience as an important partner with scientific, well-controlled studies and rigorous experimentation. Blending them is more than just developing and obeying rules and standards that can be universally used in all cases. In fact, the overreliance on a narrow set of principles or rules of practice and claiming that something is either ethical or unethical accordingly is a very common temptation that is hard to defend. So, when what you do is something ethical or unethical, good or bad, I tend to think “it depends” is a more useful place to start. Making a little word like ethics or ethical carry all the work of a final judgment without describing a particular matter and then describing the particular ethical values involved in a way that everyone uses or understands is a real challenge. Perhaps even more important than the challenges of a new technology, like the use of lasers in dentistry, are patient treatment decisions that are based on current knowledge and scientific evidence for safety and efficacy for a specific clinical matter at hand.

I need to disclose here that I have chaired the Ethics Committee for the Academy of Laser Dentistry since its founding almost 25 years ago. I can tell you, then, without breaking any confidentiality, that there are ethical challenges surrounding laser use, but most of them are brought on by prioritizing commercial thinking about the dentist-patient relationship over professional ethical thinking.

Dr. Carreiro: What is one hurdle between professional, commercial, and political ethics?

Dr. Patthoff: Commercial and political ethics are based on trust in competition; professionals and families are built on trust in collaboration. When laser companies or laser users and promoters think and act as if professional ethics is just another form of competition, then getting the parties to come together under a common trust can be their major, if not the only, hurdle. In order to overcome this hurdle, they need to engage in professional collaboration, where most ethical challenges can be discussed and addressed together. Some patients, however, trust and value competition more. It is, after all, the basis of our free market and democratic political system that society also needs and trusts. In these cases, it becomes even more important to remain respectful and knowledgeable and skilled in professional ethical thinking and to reinforce the critical importance of the role of professional ethics and the trust it aims to bring about. This is the focus of the explanations and practical ethical tools offered in the book – to both the profession and society.

Dr. Carreiro: Introducing new technology and related treatment protocols presents challenges for continuing education and training. We are seeing educational and training programs that are at times promotional, manufacturer-supported, and, at times, lacking full disclosure. Some are even being bundled with an institute or study club offering certification and credentials. What are your feelings on the impact of these programs on continuing education?

Dr. Patthoff: Mixed. As far as I know, there have always been places for all kinds of promotional and manufacturer-created information-sharing forums. Even now they have merit. I mean, who else but the designers and manufacturers of technology know better how they work and how they might be used sometime, maybe even beyond some of the primary purposes for which they were initially designed? Most of the chief scientists and developers of these ideas have several, perhaps dozens of, professionals working with them – including what are sometimes called user groups. The important point here, though, is that what one professional does or even multiple professionals do and can do, does not make what they do something that should be adopted by the profession as a whole. A popular vote by a group doesn’t trump scientific evidences, rational thinking, or common sense. They all have value and each should be taken in the limited and partial roles they play.

Dr. Carreiro: When technology like lasers is introduced to a health profession, how does the new technology fit with usual and customary treatment protocols for managing disease and improving overall health?

Dr. Patthoff: Technology is a mix of science and marketing; although some languages have common words to separate the device from its use, our common English language does not. Technology is considered the device AND its use. You say something very important and easily overlooked, though, when you so rightly separate technology from new treatment protocols. I want to be sure about what you might be asking, then, because I am concerned what is easily overlooked will be missed here.

What perks my ears first on this, then, is when technology is equated with pure science and progress, or when science is equated with reason. I also wonder if new protocols for a specific technological device are being equated with, substituted for, or prioritized over the usual and customary treatment protocols for managing disease. In short, we should see red flags when information and promotion are equated with education. Mixing and twisting these ideas and phrases can be great sales strategies, but they will just as easily confuse rather than educate many practitioners, professional board meetings, and ultimately patients and society.

Dr. Carreiro: What is your opinion of what you see happening in continuing education in the dental space and perhaps the silos being created currently?

Dr. Patthoff: My general feeling for what I actually see happening is not good. I say this from the sense that more professionals in society, as a whole, seem to prefer the marketplace for their continuing education. This is in contrast to going deeper – actually asking what it means to be a professional in their daily practice and then in their deliberations about how to address complex ethical questions; this thinking needs to be done in terms of self-formation, and also with a broad mix of colleagues rather than only with the special product groups who, in reality or because of their very nature, develop and promote their special niches primarily to get a return on their investments.

These information/technology groups can easily become special silos of knowledge and skill within an already larger special professional silo of knowledge and skills. As this happens, everyone must be aware that others always have something to offer, and that each of us, too, has something to offer about what it means to be a good professional. This must be done with respect and a willingness to sit back and look at what is common about what needs to be better done for the good of patients and society. Infomercials, info-seminars, info-organizations, info-centers of excellence, and info-credentials get their name, then, because they express what technology is: a mix of science and market. It is not a mix of science and professions or even a mix of science and government. People need to enter these spaces with open eyes, and not be confused by the glitter of light and harmony of sounds.

Dr. Carreiro: We are seeing more discussions in society regarding personal behavior accountability, respecting personal boundaries, and corporate values. How are these areas being addressed in dentistry? Include in your comments the private, corporate, academic, and manufacturing arenas.

Dr. Patthoff: The most exciting large-scale effort is one being facilitated through the American College of Dentists called the Professional Ethics Initiative (PEI) (<http://dentaethics.org/>). It is a collaboration between the American Dental Association (ADA), Academy of General Dentistry (AGD), American College of Dentists (ACD), American Dental Education Association (ADEA), American Society for Dental Ethics (ASDE), and several other large dental organizations that have additional activities even beyond that of the PEI (<https://acd.org/ethics/national-projects/>). Some local societies and regional groups do continuing education and some organizations structure their organizational plans around ethics and professionalism. Unfortunately this is still in very early stages and not well understood. Our book aims to help explore why this is and what the profession itself needs to do about it – both as individual professionals and in the groups that shape and, in a certain sense, oversee where the profession is moving – especially the dental schools and the dental organizations. Our book claims that commercial thinking and commercial language often so dominate that the professional voice cannot be heard or is not offered an opportunity to contribute to society's ongoing discussions about health and health matters. The book offers reasons for that claim, and opportunities to renew professions.

Dr. Carreiro: There are probably some dentists that have not been exposed to the concepts and areas of ethics that your book discusses. What guidance would you give them before diving in?

Dr. Patthoff: Just dive in! Take the time, but do take your time. Ethics is a matter of both reactive habits and slow deliberations to decide which habits to change or keep. Ethical questions are about what ought or ought not to be done, what a professional ought or ought not to be. This is a constant; hundreds of ethical decisions are made every hour just by habit. We all need to step back, though, and look at those moments when we question what should or shouldn't be, both as individuals and as professionals. This book is not meant to be a straight read. It is a text that needs to be taken in as pieces and left to simmer in the back of your mind, and then be read again with deeper understanding. It is meant to be challenged and questioned and improved upon because it is not the last work, but a useful start in making growth in professionalism an important part of one's professional practice.

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Dr. Carreiro: Despite all the challenges faced in our profession, do you feel we are in a great profession where ethics is at the forefront of dentists' decision-making, but they may not be aware of it? We all operate within a core value system that puts the needs of others first. For many of us, it is part of our makeup.

Dr. Patthoff: Yes. This is a great profession, but it was built by many others long ago before you and I decided to join it. And then the profession vetted us and said you have enough knowledge, skills, practice, and a professional attitude to start practicing all of this on your own and that society can now trust enough that you won't do too much harm and will help and work with your colleagues and learn from incidents that don't go as planned etc., etc. I agree that doing for others is part of our human and professional makeup. It is what makes living and the practice of dentistry so much fun. It is also what makes getting together with other dentists and professions so rewarding – when it is done with respect, deliberation, and understanding. That is exactly how professionalism grows and why this is a great profession.

Thank you for this opportunity.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

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Disclosure: Dr. Carreiro provides educational training for Biolase for which he receives compensation. He also has financial relationships with PerioSciences and an advisory role with ProBiora Health and Florida Probe Corporation.

Biographical information for Dr. Don Patthoff may be found on page 6.

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