PREFACE: Bioethics in Oral Health Sciences

The oral healthcare profession is slowly integrating ethics as a formal subject of study, inquiry, and practice. Most professional bodies related to oral health have incorporated codes of ethics into their program agendas and have placed them in good view on their websites. Some of these bodies have designated ethics committees that may or may not be fully functional at all times. However, the need to view ethical principles as important determinants in professional practice needs further emphasis. The scope of activities that require ethical guidance to make good clinical practice the standard, makes ethics training imperative across the profession.

Several textbooks and case-study assimilations in “dental ethics” have been published. These are often used in oral health professional schools as study and reference guides for pre-doctoral students and graduate trainees. However, the tendency to use a term such as “dental ethics” insinuates that dentistry is a distinct entity like “oral anatomy,” wherein all or some of the structures, functions, and principles may be uniquely different than other fields of study. Such compartmentalization of the application of ethical principles by disciplinary domains misdirects the focus away from the real issues. Indeed, some applications of ethical principles may be unique to the dental profession, but they comprise special situations rather than general applications.

To improve awareness of the types of ethical issues that face the oral healthcare professions and to define potential areas where further research may be needed, a special issue of *Ethics in Biology, Engineering and Medicine* was conceived. The idea of this issue was spawned by the successful half-day symposium “Ethical Issues in Dentistry” held as a part of the Sixth International Conference on Ethical Issues in Biomedical Engineering, at Polytechnic Institute of New York University, Brooklyn, New York, in April 2011.

PURPOSE OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

This special issue gathers a variety of “state-of-the-science” guidance through analyses and synthesis regarding the application of ethical principles in oral healthcare sciences which cover a broad range of topics that will initiate debate about the following areas: the role of the dental profession itself in the changing paradigm of healthcare delivery; the need and scope of ethics training in the dental curriculum; building ethics capacity in the professions; awareness of legal-ethical issues related to the professions; forthcoming ethical challenges as the US population ages; ethical preparedness for adapting to newer technological advances; using ethical principles in clinical settings; and authorship issues of publishing scientific reports and articles. Contributors to this issue are well versed in ethics issues in practice, in research, and in training. Several of them have formal training in bioethics, while all have experience working with ethics issues, and all serve or have served in bodies and committees that deal with ethics issues.
TOPICS IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

While the idea of this special issue emerged from the symposium mentioned above, the topics for this special issue were abridged by a large pool of factors such as time limits, journal size, availability of authors, and topic relevance—including important emerging issues.

In the first article, Charles Bertolami emphasizes that the dental school faculty does not “really teach ethics, we teach about ethics.” He discusses informative, formative, and transformative learning processes involved in shaping an ethics curriculum in the dental school. His approaches are based on two clear assumptions: (1) that students are no more ethical than the man-in-the-street and (2) that people can always change for the better.

In the second article, Evelyn Lucas-Perry and Aderonke Akinkugbe discuss learning about ethics as a formal subject area in the dental school from the students’ perspective. They contend that the “bioethical dilemma in itself is not clear cut; hence, every ethical dilemma requires critical contemplation which ethics education provides through didactic, case-based learning, and small group discussions.” They argue that the decision about accepting and implementing a change in behavior must ultimately be left to students.

The third article, by Marushka Leanne Silveira and Amit Chattopadhyay, responds to a growing idea that dentists can expand their practices and improve revenues by incorporating testing for systemic diseases as an additional service. Stating that “testing for systemic diseases in dental clinics is a potentially attractive avenue for oral health professionals and may be viewed as an opportunity to increase professional reach, expand practice and improve financial returns,” they raise nine critical questions about this issue and suggest that dentists’ competency and educational preparedness to deal with intended and unintended (known and unknown) consequences of such services should be addressed first.

In the fourth article, “Advances in Oral Fluid Testing—Proposed Property Rights, Violation of Privacy, and Revising Informed Consent,” the Anthony Vernillo and Sudeshni Naidoo contend that with biotechnological advances in “rapid diagnostic testing of oral fluids such as saliva or oral transudate leading to the identification of a wide array of pathogens, enzymes, gene products, and mutations and other biomarkers, a new paradigm related to property rights will likely emerge with more information obtained from testing an individual patient or research participant for which the dental professional should be prepared.” They opine that strategies that incorporate rapid oral diagnostic testing into oral healthcare should reshape and align dentistry with medicine, promote public health, and advance research investigations.

The fifth article, “The Ethics of Globalizing Bioethics” by Stuart Rennie and Bavon Mupenda, discusses building bioethics capacity and describes and evaluates some key ethical criticisms directed towards initiatives for capacity building. They argue that while the initiatives may be marked by ethical, practical, and political tensions and pitfalls, they can nevertheless play an important role in stimulating a critical bioethics culture in countries vulnerable to exploitation by foreign agencies and/or their own authorities.
In the sixth article, “Publication Ethics of Authorship in the Oral Health Sciences”, William Giannobile highlights general principles in biomedical publishing, with particular attention to authorship of scientific articles in the basic, translational, and clinical areas of dentistry. Essentially, he provides a set of guidelines for deciding who should be in the author list of an article (and who should not).

The seventh article, “Ethics & Aging: Challenges for the Dental Practitioner” by Sharmila Chatterjee raises the practical question: how should oral health professionals ethically deal with aging persons and populations? In this article she provides a review of some of the ethical dilemmas that care givers, including dental practitioners, should be familiar with while caring for the elderly population. Informed consent, advance directives, surrogate decision making, international issues related to aging, market complexities, healthcare resource allocation are the critical areas on which she focuses.

The eighth article “Professional Responsibility in Dentistry— What It Is and How It Works” by Joseph Graskemper, defines professional responsibility in a wider scope than ethics and law. He presents a decision-making model that may help clinicians, academics, and researchers obtain a proper resolution to complex situations to fulfill their professional responsibility. This model includes several aspects related to being a professionally responsible dental professional: consideration risk management, practice management, public relations, and professionalism/professional reputation to help dentist balance ethics, law, practice management, and risk management.

The ninth article, “HIV and AIDS in India: Legal and Ethical Implications” by Karunakaran Mathiheran and Kannan Ranganathan, discusses the many ethical, moral, and legal challenges to medical professionals as well as to the healthcare policy planners in the aftermath of the spread of HIV/AIDS in India. They discuss the legal status of several ethical principles in the light the HIV/AIDS epidemic: doctor’s duty for care; patient confidentiality; informing other healthcare professionals, sexual partners, and family members about patient status; consent for HIV testing; right to marry; right to treatment without discrimination; duties and rights of healthcare workers with HIV; and blood bank and bio-products regulations. They conclude with a call for a comprehensive HIV/AIDS law to cover all ethical aspects related to HIV/AIDS in India.

In the tenth and final article, “Ethical Issues in Replacing a Periodontally Involved Tooth with Dental Implants: Thoughts, Beliefs, and Evidence,” Liran Levin provides arguments for developing ethical guidelines for providing dental implants for replacing periodontally involved teeth because the prolonged longevity of those implants may be erroneously inferred by the naive patient. He contends that a “misleading public notion (sometimes supported by dentists) that implants will survive forever leads in some cases to early extractions of teeth.” He takes the stand that dental professionals should avoid basing treatment planning on their personal thoughts and beliefs, and that they should rather use evidence as their guide to treatment planning for dental implants. He cautions that that most of the available literature concerning dental implants is of rather short term compared to life expectancy of the population at birth or life expectancy at the time of receiving dental implants.
CONCLUDING REMARKS

The oral healthcare profession is preparing for a paradigm shift in the nature of its service delivery model, scope of activities the profession may be called upon to perform, and the size of the population it may be able to impact. The profession must take steps to arrive at the threshold of the new paradigm prudently, with full preparedness and devoid of unaddressed ethical questions. This special issue is meant to initiate debate on all such issues that may impact the oral healthcare profession in an effort to develop a workforce that is guided by sound ethical principles and works with technical and educational preparedness, is ethically aware and upright, and possesses sound judgment by using appropriate scientific evidence-based information leading to wise professional decisions.

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