

Editorial: A Bioethics Agenda in Oral Health Sciences

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Ethics is a branch of philosophy that deals with leading a good life and guiding moral conduct. Applied ethics is a discipline of philosophy that attempts to apply ethical theory to real-life situations.¹ Bioethics is the study of moral issues in the fields of medical treatment and research. Bioethics deals with the application of ethical principles to clinical care and involves moral, legal, political, biomedical research, and life sciences technologies.² In the horizon of dental sciences, bioethics plays a major role both overtly and covertly. Covert ethical applications have always manifested as usual human ethical dilemmas that oral health professionals, as human beings, face—both personally and professionally. Currently, a highly regarded dental professional, charged with ethical misconduct, is facing federal drug charges.⁴ Whereas an apparent review of the professional's background related to the charges published in the news media suggests typical personal human frailty as the primary root cause of the issues underlying the charges, this professional's actions, aimed at personal outcomes, also involved the workplace and the professional arena, therefore blurring the boundaries between the two. Such acts may be viewed as covert ways in which ethics has a role in the personal and professional life of a practitioner of oral health sciences. Unfortunately, other specific cases that involve overt misconduct in carrying out professional responsibility are numerous.^{1–4}

Bioethics has grown as a discipline and has become an important guide to professional horizons, desires, and conduct. Guidelines for an ethical approach to professional activity are being defined in all aspects of the oral health science professional: clinical ethics, research ethics, publication ethics, and public health ethics. The distinctions among medical practice ethics, research ethics, and public health ethics have become hazy as professionals multitask across disciplines and geographical locations. However, just because the boundaries between disciplines and professions sometimes appear hazy, they should not be interpreted as nonexistent. Exactly at these unclear moments, ethical guidelines can play a major role in both improving professional vision and delineating those boundaries.

Laws, cultural practices, and ethical principles practiced in different regions may vary substantially. It is therefore important to consider all such variations that may impact professional activities. Global ethics is becoming an important domain that seeks to ensure that naive people are not taken advantage of in places where ethical standards are considered lax or are not applied, leading to exploitation of patients.

An approach to bioethics for the oral health science profession may involve a large variety of domains: standard of care; allocation of resources; clinical trials; women (pregnant or not) and children; genetics; biotechnology; research; informed consent and other information related issues; healthcare system challenges such as equity and justice of care; defining boundaries of professional reach; professional preparedness; global ethics; business ethics; management ethics; research ethics; everyday clinical practice ethics; ethics education; human rights and human dignity; and ethics and politics in professional decisions.

This list is certainly not comprehensive. Some of these areas are covered in this special issue of *Ethics in Biology, Engineering and Medicine*. With growth of science, human wisdom is also expected to grow to rely upon ethical principles as a larger guide to what should be practiced (or not) and how it should be practiced. In general, at any point in space and time, our abilities are far greater than our contemporary preparedness to respond to what is known and unknown or to anticipate the unanticipated outcomes of our actions. Human wisdom requires and demands a cautious approach to human action. Although morals and ethics evolve and are not static in space and time, their applications must defer to evidence-based approaches and reasoned actions.

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