Part 1

By Michael Mera, USC ’09

On an unusually tropical day in San Francisco, former dentist and oral surgeon Tony Protopappas appeared before the U.S. Supreme Court on March 24, 2004, with a writ of habeas corpus petitioning his release from prison. Twenty years earlier, in 1984, Protopappas was charged with second-degree murder and sentenced to three concurrent terms of 15 years to life for the deaths of three young women that occurred while they were under general anesthesia.

Protopappas’ career began shortly after he graduated from dental school and completed his oral surgery residency. He opened his Costa Mesa California Dental Clinic in 1974, and by 1982, the practice was flourishing.

Protopappas employed five other dentists, as well as many office staff. He was the only practitioner in the office with a license to administer general anesthesia and was responsible for standardizing doses given to patients that were prepared by his office assistants.1

On Sept. 28, 1980, a feeble Kim Andreassen presented at the Costa Mesa clinic for a root canal, three fillings and a crown. Andreassen’s medical history consisted of lupus, total kidney failure (requiring thrice weekly dialysis), high blood pressure, anemia, a heart murmur and a chronic seizure disorder. Her physician informed Protopappas she was not to be placed under general anesthesia.

Despite having been warned by her physician, Andreassen was placed on an I.V. general sedation by her physician, Andreassen was placed under general anesthesia. During the procedure, which was done under general anesthesia, Craven was given massive amounts of drugs, which caused her to go into a coma later that day. On Friday the 11th, while Craven was still in a coma, another patient, 51-year-old Cathryn Jones, sought dental care under general sedation at Protopappas’ clinic. She also was given massive amounts of drugs, which caused her to go into a coma as well. Both Craven and Jones died days later and were found to have suffered massive drug overdoses.

After the third victim was pronounced dead, Tony Protopappas was brought to trial. One expert witness, an oral surgeon, testifying in regards to Andreassen’s death, reported the combination of drugs administered did not make any sense.

He stated, “It is not a regimen to sedate a patient. It is illogical. It is — I don’t know anybody who does this kind of thing for sedation or anesthesia. It is really an illogical approach to treating people.”

From the People v. Protopappas case notes: “Dr. Frank McCarthy, chair of the anesthesiology department at the University of Southern California’s dental school, testified that Andreassen’s irregular breathing was symptomatic of severe toxicity and should have been interpreted as urgent and life threatening.

“He concluded Protopappas did not recognize or respond to Andreassen’s Cheynes-Stokes breathing.”

In his own defense, and throughout the trial, Protopappas maintained he felt he was treating the patients correctly, to the best of his ability and with no intent of harming anyone.

One aspect of his life that doesn’t surface in his trial notes are the allegations he faced while in dental school. According to an ethics class taught at the University of Southern California School of Dentistry, many people, including faculty and other students, knew very well that Protopappas had problems with academic dishonesty and that he cheated numerous times.

He put getting ahead in life, in the easiest manner possible, in front of the learning process that dental schools grant to each student in order to ensure good health and depth of education.

There may or may not be a correlation between Protopappas cheating in dental school and his culpability for the death of three patients. But as one study of medical students found, academic dishonesty during medical school does predispose a person to cheating in patient care later in life.2

As dental students and future practitioners, we are committed to bringing life-long learners. Not only is that important for each of us to be successful, but it also ensures that those that we care for also will be protected. The arduous nature of continued study and practice should never take a back seat to finding the easy way out.

Protopappas’ petition for writ of habeas corpus was denied on March 24, 2004, and he is currently serving his term in Folsom State Prison.2

The profession of dentistry is ranked by consumers as one of the 10 most trusted and ethical professions in America.1 So one might be inclined to believe that issues of academic dishonesty and cheating would be much less severe.

But in the August 2007 edition of the Journal of Dental Education, Andrews et al, reported a study in which 1,155 dental students were surveyed in regards to academic integrity. The survey found nearly 75 percent of the respondents admitted to some level of cheating.

And during the past several years, the dental education community has been shaken with cheating scandals at dental schools around the nation.

What can be done about cheating in dental school? Find out in part two, appearing in the next issue of Ortho Tribune.

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About the author

Mike Mera is a fourth-year DDS candidate at the University of Southern California, School of Dentistry. He graduated from Brigham Young University in 2005 with a BA in public relations. Mera is the former editor in chief of the American Student Dental Association (ASDA) and current chair of the ASDA Council Communications. He also sits on the ADA Council on Communications. Mera enjoys surfing and snowboarding with his wife, father and two brothers. His hometown is Newbury Park, Calif.