Orthodontics and social justice

By Dennis J. Tartakow, DMD, MEd, PhD, Editor in Chief

Orthodontists have many similar attributes, but a common thread that binds us is the desire to help and care for people with needs. In order to define those limitations even further, one must recognize we all have an obligation to act morally and ethically for ourselves, our patients, the communities in which we are members and society in general. These are some of the principles of social justice.

What is social justice? It is a term that refers to the concept in which justice is achieved in every aspect of society, not just the administration of laws. This term can refer to self-contradictory values of justice and is sometimes considered amorphous or unstructured.

Most often, social justice refers to an individual’s, a group’s, fair treatment of an impartial share of the benefits afforded by society, or the distribution of advantages and disadvantages within a society.

To help define how orthodontics and social justice are related, one must recognize that professionalism is the central cog in this wheel. To be professional means we prescribe to the code of ethics that are taken for granted in dentistry; if we prehend by the Hippocratic oath, but dentistry does not have such an oath. Is it truly necessary? Without an oath is the way of our practice?

An ethic of individual choice and justice as community obligation

This ethic of justice suggests we should follow Aristotle as a model of a community, rather than regarding ourselves only as individuals. We are obligated to learn the fundamental values of our specific community and to act in accordance with those values. Therefore, this view claims that ethics is a matter of building character, which is formed and sustained by one’s community membership and involvement with community activities. Emphasis is placed on teaching community values and providing support for the primary institution (family, religion, neighborhood, educational institutions) that sustains community life.

An ethic of individual choice and justice as procedural fairness

Many scholars claim the above concepts disregard the views of ethics and social justice held by those from other cultures, or whose identity is neither that of particular individuals, community members or based on the standpoint of all other people who are excluded due to marginalization, minority, racial, gender or sexual preferences biases. Ethically, this means people should be understood and respected in terms of social justice as procedural fairness.

For more on ethics, see Michael Meru’s article on page 12.

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From the Editor

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