Current ethical guidelines in India are deficient

An Interview with Assistant Prof. Saurab Bither, Christian Dental College, Ludhiana, India

The first handbook on ethical and legal issues for dentists in India was recently released by the Christian Dental College in Ludhiana. In India, Dental Tribune Asia Pacific spoke with author Assistant Prof. Saurab Bither about the book, and its discussion of ethical issues in dental practice.

What are the central issues in dental ethics in India and how have they become of greater concern?

Dentistry is flourishing in India thanks to technology, education and stringent measures adopted by regulatory bodies like the DCI and IDA. Unfortunately, there are members of the dental fraternity who resort to unethical practices and flout all norms, guidelines and ethics of practice in order to make a quick buck or just out of financial need. The image of the entire dental profession may suffer as a result of the unethical actions of those few.

What are the main conclusions of your book and what are their implications in practice?

The current ethical principles in Indian dentistry are helpful guidelines regarding dentistry's professional obligations, but are deficient in that they do not address the reciprocity of the relationship between dentists and their patients or the principle of self-determination. Professional ethical codes, however, are important in developing higher standards of conduct, as they are based upon what are considered to be the correct attitude and procedure.

Politics, but no policy discussion on oral health

The Australian federal election is currently characterised by a focus on the current Prime Minister’s (Julia Gillard) hair and the Opposition Leader’s (Tony Abbott) swimwear. Attention was to be shifted to their teeth instead, perhaps we could move onto policy substance. Both of the contenders for Australia’s top job have socially relevant issues to consider. Both of the contenders shifted to their teeth instead, perhaps we could move onto policy substance.

Assistant Prof. Saurab Bither

Ethical guidelines for dentistry have indeed been formulated by regulatory bodies like the Dental Council of India (DCI) and Indian Dental Association (IDA). What this handbook offers is legal guidelines because ethical issues that arise in the delivery of any health-care services are usually accompanied by legal issues. In this handbook, we also sought to highlight the concept of dental negligence and the relevant provisions of legislation pertaining to this matter in our country. Forensic odontology and the need for expert witnesses in the field are discussed in the book as well.

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With increasing dental tourism in India, it is also very important that ethical guidelines are followed and implemented in dental practice. Should this not be done, we might fail to benefit from an increasing number of foreign patients in the future.

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For the last two years, there has been a battle underway, with the Labour Government attempting to abolish the previous Coalition Government’s scheme that allows complex and chronic conditions to be treated, and reintroduce a national dental programme along the lines of Labor’s previous programme, in order to provide treatment for low-income earners. This has twice been blocked by Senate. The DentCare plan proposed by the National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission, intended to provide universal access to oral health care through a new tax, has not transpired either. Unfortunately, there are members of the dental fraternity who resort to unethical practices and flout all norms, guidelines and ethics of practice in order to make a quick buck or just out of financial need. The image of the entire dental profession may suffer as a result of the unethical actions of those few.

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