When it comes to industry ethics, I must say ‘I’ve had enough’ Part 2 of 2

by Dr. Gordon Christensen, DDS, MSD, PhD

Where has the professionalism of my “profession” gone? I have seen a major degeneration in the ethics of the dental profession over the past several years.

Evaluation of products

Most dental journals and magazines have product endorsements in them from companies or individuals that have been paid to evaluate the products they are endorsing. If independent companies want to evaluate dental products and report on them, honesty in the results would be increased if these evaluations were accomplished without fees paid to the evaluating company by the manufacturer that produced the product. The evaluating companies should obtain their income from publication of their data, or other means. The lay group, Consumer Reports, is a prototype for such evaluations. This company does not allow publication of their data for commercial purposes, but it is readily available from the company. Some dental companies use information from published papers in their product advertisements. With the permission of the author/researcher, and if the information is used in fairness to other similar products in the study, such inclusions in ads appear to be appropriate. Reference to the published paper should be included.

Solution: Again, dentists beware! Analyze the source of endorsements carefully. When the endorsement in an advertisement looks questionable, money has probably changed hands. Companies, be honest! Your good products sell by word of mouth about clinical success. Honest, conservative ads are appreciated, and you are respected when practitioners read them.

Speakers on the lecture circuit

After spending roughly 40,000 hours on the circuit, I can probably comment on this one with some experience. Can you smell a paid-off speaker? If you can’t, you are pretty naive. Although for most of the larger meetings, speakers have to sign a statement that they are not being paid by companies producing products contained in their lectures, there are many devious ways to get around that challenge. How about paying spouses or other relatives, funding children in college, donating to favorite charities in the speaker’s name (this is OK if the money is donated in the company’s name and the speaker does not get a tax deduction), using company condos, cabins, or planes, paid vacations, and many other manufacturer perks? It is relatively easy to observe when a speaker favors one company or another in lectures. It is obvious when the speaker is selling his or her own dental product to the exclusion of other products in the course.

Solution: Do not attend lectures of speakers who appear to be on the “take.” These speakers soon expose their financial commitments by their overt favor of products, companies, or commercial techniques. I have seen hundreds of speakers come on the circuit and burn out within a couple of years. Suggest reliable speakers to your colleagues, especially younger dentists.

Summary

I apologize for making some of you nervous, and perhaps even resentful, but I HAVE HAD ENOUGH! I do not like the new unethical face of my profession, where incessant seeking of more money has replaced service to the public, honesty, and self-respect. Numerous areas of major ethical concern in dentistry are identified in this article. The ongoing, if not accelerating, degeneration of professional ethics in dentistry is clearly evident to even casual observers. Improvements in professional ethics are necessary to regain our self-respect and the respect of the people we serve. All of us need to improve, including practitioners, speakers, dental schools accomplishing research, manufacturers, editors, and evaluating groups. It is time to return to honesty and to dealing with our fellow men and women in the way we would want to be treated ourselves. I do not think it is too late. 

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