A ccording to the Oxford American Dictionary, “Schools of ethics in Western philosophy can be divided, very roughly, into three sorts. The first, drawing on the work of Aristotle, holds that the virtues (such as justice, charity, and generosity) are dispositions to act in ways that benefit both the person possessing them and that person’s society. The second, defended particularly by Kant, makes the concept of duty central to morality: humans are bound, from a knowledge of their duty as rational beings, to obey the categorical imperative to respect other rational beings. Thirdly, utilitarianism asserts that the guiding principle of conduct should be the greatest happiness or benefit of the greatest number.”

The Oxford American Dictionary goes on to define ethics as, “Moral principles that govern a person’s or group’s behavior.”

Nash, in the May 2007 issue of the European Journal of Dental Education, stated, “Ethics is about the basic moral standards inherent in the structure of social living, incumbent on all human beings regardless of the presence or absence of any religious convictions.”

In dentistry, ethics is crucial, owing to the fact that patients seeking care place their well-being in the dentist’s hands. In the American Dental Association’s (ADA) Principles of Ethics and Code of Professional Conduct, it states: “The dental profession holds a special position of trust within society. As a consequence, society affords the profession certain privileges that are not available to members of the public-at-large. In return, the profession makes a commitment to society that its members will adhere to high ethical standards of conduct.”

Nash added that, “The goal of the relationship in which one assumes the role of health professional and the other [one assumes] that of the patient is the benefiting of the patient.”

**Ethics in dentistry**

The ADA’s Principles of Ethics and Code of Professional Conduct set forth five major ethical principles that dentists must adhere to. They are: patient autonomy (self-governance), non-maleficence (do no harm), beneficence (do good), justice (fairness) and veracity (truthfulness).

The document states that: “Members of the ADA voluntarily agree to abide by the ADA Code as a condition of membership in the Association. They recognize that continued public trust in the dental profession is based on the commitment of individual dentists to high ethical standards of conduct.”

In 2002, ASDA adopted its own code of ethics, which states: “The American Student Dental Association recognizes the importance of high ethical standards in the dental school setting. Therefore, the Association believes students should conduct themselves in a manner reflecting integrity and fairness in both the didactic and clinical learning environments. Ethical and professional behavior by dental students is characterized by honesty, fairness and integrity in all circumstances; respect for the rights, differences and property of others; concern for the welfare of patients, competence in the delivery of care and preservation of confidentiality in all situations where this is warranted.”

All ASDA members are also members of the ADA, and we commit to abide by the ethical principles within these two codes. Not only do we commit to observe these two codes, but also it is likely that we have codes of ethics and ethics curricula specific to our dental schools.

Despite the codes of ethics that
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We have an obligation to our patients, to ourselves, and to our profession to be ethical in all senses of the word.

by Andrews, et al., that when some students cheat, giving themselves an unfair advantage, the remainder of the students feel they must cheat in order to maintain equality. Second-ly, the supposed ease at which those who cut corners have in getting high grades and into residency programs causes others who may not have behaved that way to follow suit.

What can we do?

Current dental ethics literature agrees that change must be made. The question isn’t if, it’s how to change. Below is a series of suggestions found in the literature and compiled by the author.6,7

• Lead by example. “Faculty must not look the other way, nor take the easy way out, but be a firm arbiter of the ideals that our code of ethics explains as our special privilege,” stated Dr. Maitland in his article “Disturbing Trends in Dental Education” in the June 2006 issue of The Journal of Esthetic and Restorative Dentistry.5

In the Andrews et al. article, one student was quoted as saying, “There is a huge double standard implemented by the faculty of my school. They often get upset at us for using old tests to focus our studying; however, they ask us to memo-rize questions on National Board’s to help class prepare.” In a similar manner, students used technology to not only cheat themselves but to tempt future classes into cheating as well.4

In a survey of dental school deans conducted by Beensterboer, et al., 85 percent of schools reported incidences of copying during a didactic exam. 52 percent of the students reported using technology to cheat.8 Among many others, the basis of academic dishonesty is that students each using camera cell phones, taking one picture of one page of an exam at varying times in an exam, then collaborating and putting them into a Word document to distribute it to their classes. The use of technology not only makes cheating easier to justify that same inevitable wrong nature of the act, making it easier to justify that same behavior in the future. Secondly, it fosters a culture of acquiescence rather than hard work, because the cheater gets all of the glory without any of the stresses that come along the road to success.

Academic dishonesty is contagious — to oneself and to those around you. The basis of academic dishonesty being contagious to oneself is that continued cheating breeds two outcomes. First, it causes the person cheating to become desensitized to the inherently wrong nature of the act, making it easier to justify that same behavior in the future. Secondly, it fosters a culture of acquiescence rather than hard work, because the cheater gets all of the glory without any of the stresses that come along the road to success.

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