Criteria for future dental student applicants

By Dennis J. Tartakow, DMD, MEd, Editor, Ortho Tribune in Chief

In the last few years, dental ethics and communication skills have increasingly been recognized as essential parts of the undergraduate curriculum, something that is laudable and significant but not enough. It has its dangers.

If we recognize “ethics” as a separate, scrutinized academic subject, we might take from it that there is a time when one practices ethically and a time when one does not. Ethics does not exist in a box that we bring with us when examining our patients and remove when needed. To some, this might imply that ethics are not something intrinsic to everything that a doctor does nor should they apply to all human beings as well.

To individuals who do not know why or what they believe, teaching ethics and communication skills is like teaching pathology to those who haven’t learned the basics. Such students may be able to recite treatment protocols by listing signs and symptoms, but they’d be perilously unsafe in practice. They would not understand the whys of practice and may not be able to modify treatments to circumstances. Teaching undergraduate ethics is not necessarily the only answer.

Teaching ethics and social justice principles would undoubtedly be helpful at the undergraduate level but perhaps could begin at the stage when dental students are selected for admission.

When our students graduate, they should know about ethics of individual choice and justice for (a) procedural fairness, (b) community obligation, (c) attentiveness to others and (d) social transformation. Just because all serious dental school candidates have high grades—or sometimes the determining admission criterion might be record-breaking athletics, an illustrious career on the stage, a dazzling presence at an interview—illustrious career on the stage, a dazzling presence at an interview—someone might assume that aspiring to understand human beings from the Socratic reflection and only want to understand the Krebs’ Cycle because it is but a tiny part of the whole patient.

The Socratic reflection is a type of pedagogy in which questions are asked not only to depict individual answers but also to encourage fundamental insight into relevant issues. Plato’s Socrates made important and lasting contributions to the fields of epistemology and logic, and the influence of Plato’s ideas and approach remains strong in providing a foundation for much of western philosophy.

Humility students are another ascending group from which we may want to consider future dental student candidates. This group is in the realm of those providing English majors; perhaps these candidates should receive equal tribute and acknowledgment for admission to dental school as do our science, anatomy and pathology majors.

Re-accreditation of dental schools should demand that besides clinical skills, doctors must also know the difference between right and wrong, ethical and non-ethical. Re-accreditation of dental schools should demand that besides clinical skills, doctors must also know the difference between right and wrong, ethical and non-ethical and good judgment and bad judgment.

Dental boards should insist that all clinicians demonstrate their awareness for identifying non-dental concerns such as social justice and human rights issues as they relate to the patient.

Having taught pre- and postgraduate medical and dental students for almost 40 years, it is appalling to realize most of our students cannot put two sentences together with any semblance of English dexterity or proficiency. Most lack the ability to use proper verbs, tenses or punctuation, demonstrating a total lack of any knowledge and understanding of the English language.

This is a plea for a more scholarly and intellectual dental culture. This is not an assertion that dentists who listen to Bach and Beethoven, read Chaucer and Gervantes or are interested in the arts are better people than those who are serious about continuing education seminars. This might be a contentious issue, and we might disagree. However, this is a strong suggestion that greater knowledge of communication skills and aptitude for the English language is ultimately an index that dentists are really on a doctoral level of sophistication and are thus appropriately capable of keeping up with the holistic subject matter involving their profession as it relates to the human beings they treat.

Somerset Maugham wrote, “I do not know a better training for a writer than to spend some years in the medical profession” (Foster, 2009). The opposing side is also true: Doctors might better appreciate the scope of their own professional milieu by keeping up with the artists, writers, musicians and philosophers who have fought to recognize and comprehend the moniker of human beings.

Real evidence-based dentistry involves consideration for all available evidence about human beings and their place in the community and society.

This editorial was inspired by the following articles:


OT Corrections

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