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## Ethics In Dentistry

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## ETHICS IN DENTISTRY\*

By HERMAN E. THOMPSON, '42

ETHICS is a subject which, of necessity, is considered in any and all walks of life either consciously or unconsciously. Any move one chooses to make is prompted by some motive, either for himself, or for his fellowman. Ethics is indeed a broad subject and surely justice could not be done by any one particular individual, as it is something that grows and changes in various situations. It is altered by its environments and everything that goes to make up the environment.

Ethics has been defined as "the science of moral philosophy." This statement may be substantiated by saying that in the strict sense of the word it is not a science, but should be regarded as a philosophy, since there is no exact universal definition. It is something which is abstract in the truest sense of the word. The concepts of ethics to any one individual depend upon how that individual thinks, what he considers right and what he considers wrong. Notwithstanding the various interpretations which have been made, it still retains its original Greek meaning which pertains to character and character-building.

This subject has passed down through the centuries, each generation, with its master minds, having made definite contributions to our literature of today. However, as an ever changing and intangible something, it is still as abstract to us as it was to those of yesteryear.

Ethics has its rightful place in all lines of endeavor regardless how high or low it may rank in the scale of our society. There is an "ethical standard," as it is termed, which we set for ourselves and it is left for us to live up to it. Our moral duty must be recognized whether we call it ethics, morality, or just common honesty. One is naturally most interested, when considering such a subject, in being able to make a practical application in his every day life. As students of dentistry we shall restrict our attention to the ethical principles involved; how they are involved, and to a consideration of the possible results. We shall not leap immediately into the part that they play in the practice of dentistry. At present they may appear too far-fetched. However, we shall

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consider them first in our preparatory lives and cast those reflections into the future when we shall attempt to put our teachings into practice.

When considering "Ethics" as a formal course, very often it is laughed at and given a very little serious consideration. Maybe this is due to the fact that we have heard over and over again such similar teachings of right living in our Sunday schools and churches that they are no longer considered practical. We listen to these lectures and go on as we did before. In reality, the converse should be the case due to the fact that there is something very definite which we can contribute. Our every act speaks something very certain which makes an indelible impression, regardless of whether it is right or wrong. We do not wish to think of the kind of ethics which has a habit of lying inert and only arising at intervals to make demands, but instead, the ever-living type, the type that keeps us alert and ever mindful of the other fellow. It is true that we may start off greatly discouraged when we look at the accomplishments of others. This should only encourage us when we remind ourselves of the fact that the road to better living along any line is a gradual process. As someone has said, "You can't convert the world, but the world is as good as it is because somebody has kept on trying."

To students, a course in ethics is useless and a loss of time unless it is entered with an open and fertile mind; minds which are able and willing to absorb the very best in literature which can be found, and the teachings from the experiences of various persons who have traveled the road ahead of us. This does much in building up high ideals in our young minds of dentistry which lays a solid foundation for all of our future work. Too often, however, this has not been the case. This has been shown as the result of some men's actions after their graduation, when they fall into the ruts which are so greatly disapproved according to their ethical training. In order to eradicate this future pitfall, it may be well not to consider "ethics" as a separate course or confine its principles to any one particular line of work, but thoroughly integrate it into our every act, in all of our work and with our fellow-classmen. If this is begun while we are still in that preparatory state, it will grow and develop in us. NOW is the time to begin striving for the ideal. The ideal is certain not to be reached. However, we may do our best to approach it in dealing with our line of endeavor.

In learning anything new, we too often attempt to start on the same level with the one who has been doing that same thing for years. Instead of this, we must satisfy ourselves with the more gradual process of learning each detailed step so that a thorough understanding or knowledge may be obtained. When we become satisfied to do this, we look for the very best and highest ideals. We should strive toward them in our everyday relationships with our fellow-students, instructors, and clinical patients, and make every effort to produce work as nearly perfect as possible. We should not, as beginners, try short cuts in our work, as this may lead to inferior work. Time will come later when we shall be better fitted to learn such, having laid the foundation for production of the finest type of workmanship.

It is in school that we may learn the very basic difference between a profession and a business. The people with whom we are to come in contact are looked upon entirely differently. They make this demand upon us by confiding in us. In a profession there is something, whether tangible or intangible, that places service above material gain, battles all forces which make for disintegration or demoralization of our highest ideals, fights in defense of honor of the profession and protection of material and moral welfare of the people. In the profession the human element reigns. Personal services are rendered to supply personal needs, and do not become a matter of selling something as in business. Diseases are treated or prevented. Such services are not objects to be transmitted. Such services do not present charges, nor are they listed under various prices as commodities. Honest thinking individuals realize that they could not possibly pay the price for such services. Instead, fees are presented to that individual for the services rendered. In making a fee, one must consider such things as the materials used, cost of production of the restoration (if required), the time element, the benefit that the patient derives from one's services, and the cost of your training for such work. Professional service implies much more than what we actually think. Frequently patients desire certain types of work. It is up to us, however, to insist upon the right thing regardless of our profit.

In these early years no ideal should be too high to be striven for. The significance of an ideal and its reaction upon the individual has a very definite influence upon the profession and the quality of service to humanity. The ideals of dentistry are

gain should be subordinate considerations. When one thinks of material gain, he immediately thinks of trade. On the other hand, when professional service is thought of, sacrifice runs hand in hand with it. Patients place all of their confidence within the hands of the professional man, who in turn should act as a protector to them. As soon as profit motives dominate a calling, it ceases to be a profession. Professions, to a large extent, are self-governed and self-disciplined. It is left to us of the future to keep them so by ethical practices.

The ethical principles we read about should be put into practice. When this is done, greater demands can be made upon society. This is not possible when only a few in a vast number attempt it. This brings out the necessity of keeping these principles constantly before the minds of professional groups. This can be done through the literature and the dental societies. It is left to us to prove that the profession is still dedicated to serving as practitioners of the healing art to the point of sacrifice if necessary. If this is done in sincerity, little will be necessary in the way of legislation. *Let us preserve both body and soul by consecration of the noblest aspirations of our lives, and by proving through act and thought that dentistry has a mission among men.*

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