

# An Innovative Approach to Teaching Ethics and Professionalism

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The recently released Macy Report<sup>1</sup> addresses many of the existing educational challenges in dentistry. Among them are important ethical considerations such as ensuring that teaching, research and services contribute to help reduce oral health disparities and that clinical training includes community-based, patient-centred care.<sup>2</sup> Dentists cannot be properly trained to be essential stewards of oral health if the curriculum is solely focused on the technical aspects of clinical dentistry. Professionalism, an ethic of care, interpersonal communication and collaboration with other health care providers are also fundamental components of providing optimum patient care.

At the Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry, we have developed some innovative teaching methods that we believe prepare our students for the challenges of professional practice, allow them to acquire the clinical competencies specified by regulatory bodies and help them to become ethical dental practitioners. It is our hope that through this process, we can also develop strategic partnerships with our graduates as they become ambassadors for dentistry and future supporters of our school.

At Schulich Dentistry, we aim to integrate ethics into clinical practice and the educational process itself. Through our undergraduate curriculum, we provide an opportunity for students to incorporate ethical principles and professionalism into their student experience. This should help lay the foundation for our students to develop ethical best practices after graduation.

## Inculcating Responsibility and Trust from the Start

It is incumbent upon dentists to treat patients, staff and colleagues with respect. This is more likely to occur when dental students are themselves treated with dignity and respect during the learning process. Our vision at Schulich Dentistry is to create an environment of mutual respect that begins with the white coat ceremony. Along with their white coats — seen by many as a symbol of trust and respect — students receive and recite their oath of commitment. This highlights the professional obligations of honesty, integrity, compassion and fairness that students must emulate.

In the first-year Practice Administration course, students apply the principles of ethics and the core values of the profession in case-based discussions. Case-based teaching encourages students to transform the theoretical into the practical, while being aware of the need for independent assessment when conflicting ethical principles arise. To reinforce lectures on ethics and to prompt classroom discussions, we show videos of standardized patient–dentist interactions, portraying negative and positive examples of clinical situations.

According to a 2006 Gallup poll, dentists scored lower than nurses, physicians, pharmacists and veterinarians on a scale measuring honesty and trustworthiness.<sup>3</sup> To examine the complexities of these trends, we challenge our first-year students to write essays comparing dentists with other business professionals.

We also discuss the effects of the popular media on dentistry, the negative stereotyping of dentists and the exploitation of patients' fears and anxieties with regard to dental treatment. To combat public misperceptions of dentists' self-interest, Schulich Dentistry believes that dentists need to aspire to be moral exemplars that have a strong sense of community involvement.

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With Dr. Schwartz observing, a Schulich Dentistry student conveys bad news to a simulated patient. These scenarios provide a good opportunity for students to practise their interpersonal communication skills.

Photo: Shawn Simpson

### Integration and Collaboration

Since dentistry is an integral part of Schulich Medicine & Dentistry, the dental faculty enjoys a close relationship and shares clinical teaching resources with the medical program. These resources include the Clinical Skills Facility and the Standardized Patient Program. In the third-year Practice Administration course, we now use standardized patients to augment the teaching of professional ethics, interpersonal communication and critical thinking. This is accomplished by exposing dental students to real-life encounters in small groups of 3–4 students. Each student has the opportunity to use his or her ethics and communication skills with a simulated patient in a predetermined, clinical practice scenario. In the fourth-year Practice Administration course, professional ethics, interpersonal communication and law (jurisprudence) are combined in additional standardized patient encounters, to provide more opportunities to apply communication skills, gain an appreciation of risk management and provide experience in clinical decision-making. The objective of the simulated patient experience is to demonstrate that what you say and how you say it is important when providing competent and ethical dental services, and that humility and empathy will go a long way to ensuring a satisfying dentist–patient relationship.

Integration of ethics and interpersonal communication is also the central focus of topics such as conflict resolution, how to handle errors, ob-

taining true informed consent, dealing with difficult patients, managing conflicts of interest, and ethical advertising and marketing. Many of these topics are blended into the standardized patient scenarios, enabling the students to gain practical experience.

### Student Empowerment

To emphasize research, creativity, peer collaboration and empowerment, third-year students join one of 9 groups that research, develop and deliver a classroom presentation on various practice administration topics. After each group presentation, classmates are asked to grade the presentation and provide constructive criticism. The assessments by fellow students account for 50% of the eventual grade. The skills developed in this exercise enable students to learn about improved consultation and collaboration between dentists as well as between dentists and dental specialists, reinforcing the team aspect of patient care.

Student empowerment is also present in the recently created Student Issues Committee, where faculty advisors meet with student representatives from first through fourth year and from the Internationally Trained Dentists Program to propose options for mediating concerns that have not been successfully managed between a student and a faculty or staff member.

### Research in Dental Ethics

A recently completed research project examined the perceptions of general dentists in Ontario regarding issues that may be perceived as a potential conflict of interest. The recognition of conflicts of interest was positively associated with the number of years of dental practice, interpersonal communication training and reading ethics-related articles in journals.<sup>4</sup>

In a new project, I am supervising research on global ethics by undergraduate dental students participating in medical–dental outreach programs in Tanzania and Lebanon. It is hoped that the experiences of these dental students, which are shared with the student body during Dentistry Research Day, will encourage other dental students to take a more active role in meeting the needs of our underserved populations in Canada and will also help them develop a greater concern for global disparities in dental health. By acting as role models on access to care issues in dentistry, these students will hopefully encourage greater participation by others in future outreach projects.

Another research project that I am leading involves the integration of patients' voices into dental education. This involves videotaping patients who have been marginalized by their health or financial status and evaluating the effect of these personal accounts on students' empathy toward dental patients. This project, conducted with the help of Drs. Richard Bohay and Judy McCormick, has been awarded the UWO Innovation in Teaching Fellowship for 2009.

### Enabling Reflective Practitioners

As part of the Practice Administration course, first- and third-year dental students are asked to keep a journal in order to observe and learn from their own professional development and growth. By documenting both positive and negative ethical experiences, students are taught to recognize defining moments in their professional development. In this way, many students develop a better understanding of the effects of their own feelings and how to develop a mutually respectful relationship with patients. Reflective practitioners learn to question their assumptions and use past experiences while recognizing gaps in their own learning, which in turn fosters a commitment to excellence and lifelong learning.<sup>5</sup> Reflective learning has become a fundamental aspect of integrating ethics within the undergraduate curriculum.

These are challenging yet exciting times in dental education. Dental education has been affected by declining financial resources, which has rendered the realization of educational, research and service missions a challenge for dental schools. Our goal is for Schulich Dentistry graduates to have a greater understanding of and expanded experience with professional ethics, interpersonal communication, respect and empathy as these relate to professional dental practice. With these traits, we hope that our graduates will not only be capable of providing competent, ethical, patient-centred care, but will become teachers, visionaries, alumni supporters and community leaders who play an active role in meeting the challenges facing tomorrow's dental students and practitioners in Canada. Incorporating an integrated and humanistic ethics education into the undergraduate curriculum should lead to higher levels of post-graduate professionalism, increased patient trust and stronger partnerships with our alumni. In time, and with ongoing research in these areas, we will know for certain. ♦

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