

## **Professionalism in Dentistry**

*Gemma Wheeler is an undergraduate dentist studying at Cardiff University and a recent recipient of the Association of Dental Groups (ADG) Undergraduate Professionalism Bursary Award. Here she discusses what professionalism means to her and the wider dental community.*

Professionalism relates to the way in which we all behave, and guidelines have been produced by our schools, universities and governing bodies that we must all adhere to. Although some dental students may interpret this as turning up on time and looking smart for clinics, professionalism reaches far wider.

In reality, professionalism is the way in which we act when nobody is watching. It relates to ethical scenarios, how we behave towards our patients and colleagues, and how we hold ourselves in practice. Whilst the GDC's *Standards for the Dental Team* defines the minimum behaviours expected for us all, a true *dental professional* is someone who strives to become the best clinician they can and always seeks to exceed these standards to deliver best practice.

### **Ethics**

Our ethics are a set of moral principles that we follow which influence our decision-making and how we determine behaviours that are right or wrong. Ethical principles build up the fundamentals of what "best interests" are, which is important when working with patients as we always have the potential to do harm.

Medical ethics is built upon the three principles of:

- autonomy, respecting the patient's right to choose,
- beneficence, the concept of working in the patient's best interests, and
- non-maleficence – doing no harm.

Lapses in ethical behaviour influence patient care on both an individual level and in wider practice. Such failings can impact the general public, causing scandal and invoking national enquiries, such as in the case of harrowing "Francis Report".

### **Patients**

Professionalism with regards to patients has much semblance to medical ethics, but expands to include our responsibilities around consent, confidentiality, and behaviour. We must always listen to our patients and respect their beliefs, even if they are different from our own. A dental professional will respect patients from all walks of life without discrimination against any characteristic, whether protected in law or otherwise.

However, treating patients equally does not mean treating them all the same, rather it requires us to modify our approach in order to accommodate different people's needs. This need to listen to patients and respect their wishes can sometimes conflict with our interpretation of what is in their best interests, and it is our reactions in these situations that can determine how professional we come across. The need to gain valid consent from our patients means that we must also be able to communicate effectively so they are able to understand the treatment on offer. Confidentiality is also a key aspect of professionalism relating to patients and we must always act to "maintain and

protect patients' information"; including keeping accurate and up-to-date notes and increasing patient understanding of the Data Protection Act.

### **Self**

Key issues with professionalism in relation to self include our personal behaviour, our professional development, and our use of social media. Indeed the role that social media plays in our lives is of increasing relevance in modern society. This can be a productive and useful tool for sharing information relating to education and best practice, but we should recognise the increasing challenges and dangers presented by using such technology. If used poorly, we risk breaking the rules of confidentiality, as well as damaging trust that the public has in us. During university I represented fellow students as an elected member of the Student's Union. In this role I was required to use social media on a daily basis to interact with the student community on both local and national levels. During this time I came to understand the value that such platforms can provide, but also how easy it can be to unintentionally offend someone if you are not always consciously taking into account how wide your comments can reach.

A dental professional should always act with upmost integrity and honesty, seeking to understand the community around them, and to be a trustworthy, dependable person. Of course dental professionals should also continuously undergo many forms of personal development. This ensures they are fully up-to-date in their role as a healthcare provider and their knowledge of the NHS, and that they are working to keep their skills as relevant as possible, whilst developing techniques for critical appraisal.

### **Team**

Finally, professionalism also includes how we interact with our clinical team, colleagues and peers. In the same way that we respect the diversity within the patient population, we must also respect this in our peers too. We should be able to work in any team, understanding the needs of all members without discrimination. Additionally, we must communicate clearly to provide the best patient care, and to raise any concerns. By utilising the skillset of each member in the team, dental professionals can provide the best level of care, whilst protecting patients from any harm that might be inflicted by someone working outside of their area of competence. Part of our responsibility as professionals is to recognise our weaknesses and raise any concerns where a patient may be at risk. Raising concerns is important, with guidelines produced on both local and national levels, which aim to make the process as simple as possible.

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