Current ethical guidelines in India are deficient

An Interview with Assistant Prof. Saurab Bither, Christian Dental College, Ludhiana, India

The first handbook on ethical and legal issues for dentists in India was recently released by the Christian Dental College in Ludhiana in India. Dental Tribune Asia Pacific spoke with author Assistant Prof. Saurab Bither about the book, and its discussion of ethical issues in dental practice.

Assistant Prof. Saurab Bither

Ethical guidelines for dentistry have indeed been formulated by regulatory bodies like the Dental Council of India (DCI) and Indian Dental Association (IDA). What this handbook offers is legal guidelines pertaining to this matter in our country. Forensic odontology and the need for expert witnesses in the field are discussed in the book as well.

What are the central issues in dental ethics in India and how have they become of greater concern?

Dentistry is flourishing in India thanks to technology, education and stringent measures adopted by regulatory bodies like the DCI and IDA. Unfortunately, there are members of the dental fraternity who resort to unethical practices and flout all norms, guidelines and ethics of practice in order to make a quick buck or just out of financial need. The image of the entire dental profession may suffer as a result of the unethical actions of those few.

With increasing dental tourism in India, it is also very important that ethical guidelines are followed and implemented in dental practice. Should this not be done, we might fail to benefit from an increasing number of foreign patients in the future.

What are the main conclusions of your book and what are their implications in practice?

The current ethical principles in Indian dentistry are helpful guidelines regarding dentistry's professional obligations, but are deficient in that they do not address the reciprocity of the relationship between dentists and their patients or the principle of self-determination. Professional ethical codes, however, are important in developing higher standards of conduct, as they are based upon what is considered to be the correct attitude and procedure.

Sorry, no price is given.

What is the role of the DCI and IDA in the formulation of ethical guidelines for dentistry in India?

The DCI and IDA are regulatory bodies like the Dental Council of India (DCI) and Indian Dental Association (IDA) that formulate ethical guidelines for dentistry. They are helpful guidelines regarding dentistry's professional obligations, but are deficient in that they do not address the reciprocity of the relationship between dentists and their patients or the principle of self-determination. Professional ethical codes, however, are important in developing higher standards of conduct, as they are based upon what is considered to be the correct attitude and procedure.

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For the last two years, there has been a battle underway, with the Australian Government attempting to abolish the previous Coalition Government's scheme that allows complex and chronic conditions to be treated, and reintroduce a national dental programme along the lines of the Labor's previous programme, in order to provide treatment for low-income earners. This has twice been blocked by Senate. The DentiCare plan proposed by the National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission, intended to provide universal access to oral health care through a new tax, has not transpired either.

At issue is a difference in views about policy. Should public dental care be universal or residual? In Australia, where medical and hospital cover is universal, it remains acceptable to distinguish between groups in the case of oral health because it is not seen as integral to health but as an optional extra. An important policy debate about this should be taking place during this election, and some have attempted to engage in such a debate. But there are considerable political difficulties in introducing a new tax to fund a universal scheme, finding a sufficient number of professionals to provide timely services, and (an inevitable consequence of workforce shortages) allowing auxiliary staff to provide more services directly. These conspire to make policy discussions difficult, but that is no reason not to have them. Avoiding them merely perpetuates the situation for those who have no choice but to continue using pharmaceuticals and their hands to cover their painful and embarrassing mouths.

Dental professionals must recognise and deal with ethical issues in their interaction with their patients and society in a rational and principled manner as defined by a code of ethics. For example, they must be aware of the legislation concerning malpractice, primarily the Consumer Protection Act, in order to prevent litigation. Dentists also have a duty to maintain and regularly update their level of knowledge and skills, as well as to participate in the professional community, maintain cordial relations with fellow professionals and share the burden of professional self-regulation.

Thank you very much for this interview.