Why Bioethics Matters in Dentistry: Foundations, Principles, and Cases

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OBJECTIVES:

1. Describe the foundations of dental bioethics as a discipline;
2. Summarize bioethical principles relevant to the practice of dentistry; and
3. Discuss the importance of ethical reflection in the formation of future healthcare professionals in dentistry as well as in everyday practice.

THE ORIGINS OF BIOETHICS AND DENTAL BIOETHICS

- Hippocratic Oath
- Code of Hammurabi
- Scandal
  - The Doctors’ Trial (1946-1947), Nuremberg
  - Jewish Chronic Disease Hospital (1963), Brooklyn
  - Willowbrook State School Study (1963-1966), Staten Island
  - Nutrition Research and Experimentation in Aboriginal Communities and Residential Schools (1942-1952), Manitoba
  - Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis (1932-1972), Alabama
- Ethical Codes: Nuremberg (1947), Helsinki (1964), Belmont (1979)

BIOETHICS, DEFINED

- Bioethics: an interdisciplinary study of ethical issues in healthcare and the biomedical sciences

DENTAL BIOETHICS

- “Mentir comme un arracheur des dents”
- Ethical issues: patient-client / healer-caregiver-service provider; publicity and marketing in dentistry; water fluoridation; esthetics; dental tourism; over-treatment; over-billing; access to care and vulnerable populations; refusal or withdrawal of treatment; interprofessional relationships; truth-telling; competence; confidentiality
ETHICAL THEORIES

• Utilitarianism
  o Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)
  o Possible to look at morality ‘objectively’?
  o Humankind is “under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think [. . .]” (See Jeremy Bentham’s *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (chpt. 1, pg. 1)
  o “The greatest happiness for the greatest number”
  o Tyranny of the majority

• Deontology
  o Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)
  o Sense of duty (*deon*), moral laws and obligations
  o Categorical Imperative and the Universability Test
  o Choosing between two moral obligations that are in conflict

• Virtue Ethics

• Theological Ethics

• Principism:
  o autonomy (law of self), including informed consent, truth-telling)
  o beneficence (seeking the good, best interest of the patient, limited duty)
  o non-maleficence (no needless harm, constant duty)
  o justice (equity, fair distribution of (limited) goods and resources)
  o others: non-discrimination, utility, avoidance of corruption, confidentiality

ETHICAL REFLECTION

• Cases!
• Good ethical reflection involves:
  o distancing oneself in order to reflect and to avoid impulsive, unfounded, or spontaneous reactions;
  o the ability to understand the meaning of expectations, obligations and rules, to identify the players, circumstances and context and to assess their respective importance;
  o the ability to identify the potential risks and consequences of different options for oneself and for others; and
  o the ability to argue one's decisions, and to reflect on their acceptability and 'reasonableness'. See Luc Bégin, « La compétence éthique en contexte professionnel » in Lyse Langlois (dir), *Le professionnalisme et l'éthique au travail, 2e édition*, Québec, PUL, 2011, p. 136-137.