

# Respect for patients' autonomy

Kevin I. Reid, DMD, MS

Consider a situation in which a patient says to a dentist, "Somehow my dentist found out that I was coming to see you for a second opinion for my temporomandibular joint problem. He called me at work twice and then at home, where he finally caught me. I have no idea how he knew that I had an appointment with you—that really upset me. He told me that I should not keep my appointment with you because you only treat the symptoms, whereas he treats the cause. I felt like he was just after my money. I was so offended that he would do that. I will never go to him again and neither will anyone in my family."

The patient in this scenario also says she feels that her dentist was hounding her like a salesman who was fearful of losing a sale. Her perspective is that the professional boundary had been crossed in her relationship with the offending dentist. Patients do not expect that sort of behavior from a health care professional,<sup>1-3</sup> but they do expect it in a competitive business environment.<sup>4</sup>

## BUSINESS OR HEALTH CARE PROFESSION?

Is dentistry a business or a health care profession? Some people worry that

## ABSTRACT

**Background.** Respect for patients' autonomy is an ethical principle in health care highlighted in the ADA Principles of Ethics and Code of Professional Conduct. The author presents a case example to illustrate its importance in dentistry.

**Methods.** Using a clinical example of disrespect for patients' autonomy, the author underscores the importance of incorporating normative ethical principles in patient-dentist relationships.

**Conclusions.** Respect for patients' autonomy sustains healthy boundaries between patients and the clinician. It underscores the importance of providing patient education and counsel without attempting to persuade or manipulate patients for dentists' benefit.

**Practice Implications.** Respect for patients' autonomy is a fundamental principle of health care ethics that patients expect dentists to follow. The author encourages dentists to incorporate this principle into every patient encounter.

**Key Words.** Dentists; ethics; informed consent; paternalism; personal autonomy; respect for patients' autonomy.

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dentistry has lost its way and has eschewed the virtues of professionalism, thereby changing from a health care profession to a for-profit enterprise<sup>1-3</sup> and resulting in the sort of behavior about which the patient in the opening scenario complained. In fact, lay and professional publications have asked whether dentistry subscribes to the ethics of business or to the ethics of a profession.<sup>5,6</sup>

### PATIENTS' AUTONOMY

At the core of any clinical encounter in a health care setting is respect for patients' autonomy, which, simply stated, is a principle that refers to the patient's right to choose or decline a recommendation without intimidation or pressure. Patients should be able to make decisions for themselves free from controlling interference and influences.<sup>7</sup> This means that a dental professional should approach a discussion about a diagnosis by first educating the patient about the problem and articulating the recommended treatment plan. Following the principle of respect for patients' autonomy,<sup>7</sup> he or she then should encourage the patient to consider this information carefully and offer to answer questions, with the ultimate goal of actively assisting the patient in making an informed health care decision.

It is important for the clinician to graciously accept the possibility that the decision may not include acceptance of the proposed diagnosis or treatment. Any attempt to unduly influence a patient erodes the professional boundary between dentists and patients. The dentist in the opening scenario assumed an "unwarranted degree of authority over the patient," potentially compromising the patient's autonomy,<sup>7</sup> and failed to demonstrate sensitivity regarding the considerable power differential between the dentist and the patient.<sup>6</sup>

According to Ozar and Sokol,<sup>8</sup> respecting patients' autonomy "yields satisfaction for that person [the patient] directly," while interfering with an individual's autonomy may be experienced as "a form of pain or suffering." They highlighted the positive aspects of respecting patients' autonomy by noting that when people who are capable of making autonomous choices

are allowed to do so, "their maximal well-being will almost always be more efficiently produced . . . than if someone else chooses in their stead."<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, these authors underscored "a very special kind of satisfaction" from choosing one's own actions and carrying them out within the context of one's own "values, goals, principles, and ideals."<sup>8</sup> Thus, honoring and facilitating the autonomy of patients establishes a positive and supportive structure within which the therapeutic relationship may develop.

### INFORMED CONSENT

The dentist's role in describing findings and recommendations is part of the process of obtaining informed consent, characterized by a discussion designed to foster understanding and not simply a disclosure of information. (**Editor's note:** Dentists should consult applicable state laws regarding informed consent.) The discussion about the diagnosis and treatment plan should include a dialogue about the rationale for and risks, benefits and goals of the suggested treatment, as well as any alternative treatments, all in the context of actively assisting the patient in making an informed health care decision.

According to Beauchamp and Childress,<sup>7</sup> the fundamental criteria for informed consent include the following:

- The patient is competent to make independent decisions.
- The patient's decision is based on reasonable and substantial disclosure by the dentist regarding diagnosis and treatment recommendations.
- The patient has a reasonable degree of understanding of the relevant issues (including alternative choices).
- The patient is acting voluntarily without undue influence.
- The patient provides informed consent.

The process of obtaining informed consent does not consist simply of a presentation of information. It should reflect the dentist's effort to educate and discuss the findings with the patient and, out of respect for the patient's autonomy, he or she then should encourage the patient to make oral health care decisions,

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