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. Assistant Prof. Saurab Bither 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 already exist. Why did you decide to publish a handbook on the issue?

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 because ethical issues that arise in the delivery of any health-care services are usually accompanied by legal issues. In this handbook, we also sought to highlight the concept of dental negligence and the relevant provisions of legislation 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?

Assistant Prof. Saurab Bither: 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?

Assistant Prof. Saurab Bither: 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 are considered to be the correct attitude and procedure.

Politics, but no policy discussion on oral health

The Australian federal election is currently characterised by a focus on the current Prime Minister’s (Julia Gillard) hair and the Opposition Leader’s (Tony Abbott) swimwear. Were attention to be focused on the current Prime Minister’s (Julia Gillard) hair and the Opposition Leader’s (Tony Abbott) swimwear, the differences between their views on political matters would continue to be minimal. What are the central issues in dental ethics in India and how have they become of greater concern?

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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.