

Talking Ethics



Ethics of Advertising: What's Wrong with Freebies?

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We have all noticed advertisements offering free teeth whitening to new clients. It seems harmless enough and a tempting inducement to attract new clients. However, such incentives may not be ethically sound or adhere to your college regulatory guidelines with respect to advertising.

A client who decides to come to your office solely because of the promotional offer may not be a good candidate for whitening. The client may have several composite restorations in anterior teeth or require extensive debridement prior to a whitening appointment, both of which make them a poor candidate for the procedure. CDHA's Code of Ethics discusses the principle of "beneficence," which is defined as "caring about and acting to promote the good of another. Dental hygienists use their knowledge and skills to assist clients to achieve and maintain optimal oral health and overall wellbeing, and to promote fair and reasonable access to quality oral health services as an integral part of the healthcare system."¹ One of the responsibilities for beneficence states, "Dental hygienists recommend or provide those services that they believe are necessary for promoting and maintaining a client's oral health and its effect on total body health and wellness, and which are consistent with the client's informed choice."¹ Advertising free teeth whitening, when you believe that it is not universally recommended for all clients, is not ethical behaviour.

Ethical behaviour also applies when following your college regulatory guidelines. Since offering free whitening touches on advertising rules and guidelines, let's review the advertising guidelines of two provincial regulatory bodies:

Rule 7 in the College of Registered Dental Hygienists of Alberta's Rules Respecting Advertising states, "No Inducements to Clients. A dental hygienist shall not advertise or offer any benefit to a client to induce the client to utilize the services of products of the dental hygienist unless:

- ▶ The benefit is available universally to everyone during the stated period that the offer is valid for,
- ▶ All benefits claimed are accurate and objectively verifiable, and
- ▶ There are no hidden or misleading restrictions or qualifications required to take advantage of the offer."²

The whitening example above would be in contravention of this rule because it is only available to new clients. In order for the offer to be considered appropriate by CRDHA, whitening would have to be available to all clients who attend the office during a certain time frame.

The College of Dental Hygienists of Ontario (CDHO) has a similar view about offering inducements to new clients, stating that this practice "may promote unnecessary service or the disruption of continuity of care."³

Second, as discussed earlier, there could be contraindications to a client's being able to take advantage of the offer because not all clients are candidates for whitening. Your advertising has to ensure that these qualifiers are clearly mentioned up front.

Ethical advertising can also impact dental hygienists employed in a



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typical employee-employer relationship with a dentist. After consulting with a practice advisor at one of the provincial regulatory colleges, CDHA confirmed that as long as the dental hygienist only provides the service to people who would benefit from the service, he or she would not be considered to be practising improperly. You may wish to discuss the office advertising policy with your employer if you experience strong ethical distress about the free incentives.

Being a professional comes with responsibilities. It is prudent for each of us to remember the principle of accountability and to remind ourselves that one of the requirements under this principle is to “accept responsibility for knowing and acting consistently with the principles, practice standards, laws and regulations under which they (dental hygienists) are accountable.”¹

Ethical behaviour is something we hone continuously throughout our careers. Continue the conversation with your peers about ethical distresses you may encounter. If you have an ethical dilemma to share, we’ll be pleased to consider publishing it in

an upcoming issue. If your ethical experience is selected, you will receive an “RDH” gemstone pin.

References

1. Canadian Dental Hygienists Association. *Dental hygienists’ code of ethics*. Ottawa: CDHA; 2012.
2. College of Registered Dental Hygienists of Alberta. *CRDHA rules respecting advertising*. Edmonton, AB: CRDHA; 2008.
3. College of Dental Hygienists of Ontario. *Advertising guideline*. Toronto, ON: CDHO; 2014.

