

Talking Ethics



Don't Get Distressed

Dealing With the Ethical Dilemmas of Practice

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CDHA receives frequent calls from members with ethical concerns that they face in their daily practice. The following scenario is based on a compilation of stories that have been shared with the dental hygiene practice team in the past.

Dear CDHA,

I'm not quite sure what to do. Today I saw a client who has been attending our practice for many years, but who has always seen another dental hygienist on the team. When I completed a probing reassessment, many of the readings differed greatly from those that were recorded previously. I was also dismayed to discover that there were rings of subgingival calculus around many of her teeth. I read over previous entries and there is no mention of the client being sensitive or refusing care, nor is there any indication that debridement was not completed. Unfortunately, this is not the first time that I've noticed this type of discrepancy when seeing clients generally treated by my colleague. In fact I've noticed it on at least ten other occasions. The other staff member has been with the office for many years, while I've only been here for about three years. I'm afraid that if I tell the dentist and office manager they will defend the other dental hygienist and tell me to mind my own business. Do you have any advice?

Distressed

Dear Distressed,

Working in teams can be stressful, and you have identified an important ethical issue that is all too common in the workplace. Here is our suggested response.

Arrange a time to discuss the clients in question with your colleague. Bring the client charts, radiographs, and progress notes with you. Find a time and a place where you can talk privately. The following are some possible outcomes of that meeting:

Perhaps your colleague is aware that the clients were not completed but felt it was not necessary to make note of it in the chart. If that is the case, suggest that he or she consult the record-keeping guidelines from the regulatory authority.

These guidelines clearly outline the processes that dental hygienists are responsible for following. Hopefully, your colleague will agree to adjust her documentation practices. Date and document your conversation, and keep all notes in case the situation is not resolved.

If your colleague admits that he or she is struggling with technique and proper documentation of charts, take the opportunity to share information on refresher courses that are offered to ensure that dental hygienists are competent in their clinical skills. Offer to help research some that are being held in your area. You may want to volunteer to attend with him or her. Again, document the conversation and keep your notes.

Some individuals may choose to involve their dentist employer in these conversations. However, it is inappropriate to discuss the situation with other staff members in the office to try to gauge their feelings on the matter, regardless of their title or position. The situation ought to be addressed professional to professional. If your colleague refuses to recognize that there is an issue, remind him or her of your professional duty to report concerns to the regulatory body. As professionals, we have a responsibility to report others who are not competent in their skills. Although this is a difficult decision to make, if your colleague refuses to self-reflect and re-evaluate his or her dental hygiene practice, then it becomes your duty to notify the college. It does not mean that the individual will lose his or her licence to practise, but the regulatory body has the authority to investigate the case, impose practice restrictions or demand skill remediation. Document, review, and make the call to the regulatory authority.

There is not just one way to approach the issue. You can choose to help remediate your colleague (as suggested above) as a professional courtesy, disclose concerns to your employer or report directly to the college. At the end of the day the protection of the client is the most important priority. This is a stressful situation, but ignoring the issue can cause even greater ethical distress. Your colleague may be waiting for someone to offer assistance. Be the one who offers support and ensure that the clients you share are receiving the best possible care.