

Ethical Moment



Understanding the transgender patient

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I have been contacted by one of my male patients who informed me that he is transitioning to female. The patient is a long-standing patient with a long relationship with my staff. What, if any, are the ethical considerations in preparing my staff, and how can we work to ensure the comfort of all involved?



A transgender person is defined as a person who identifies differently than their assigned sex at birth.¹ In 2016, the Williams Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles, stated that there are 1.4 million people (0.6% of US adults) who identify as transgender in the United States.²

According to the American Dental Association Principles of Ethics and Code of Professional Conduct (ADA Code), the profession makes a commitment to society that its members will adhere to high ethical standards of conduct.³ Applying the principles set forth in the ADA Code as well as the advisory opinions will help guide you and your staff members. Under Section 1, the principle Patient Autonomy (“self-governance”), “the dentist has a duty to respect the patient’s rights to self-determination and confidentiality.”³

To best reflect respect for patient autonomy and when communicating with the patient, one should use the patient’s preferred name and appropriate pronouns. The patient’s gender identity should be recorded in the chart or electronic record, and the office staff members should be made aware of the preferred gender identity. If you are not aware of which pronoun to use for a patient, you can ask the patient for their preferred pronouns. If this is uncomfortable, referring to the patient by their proper name is appropriate. This level of respect will enable “the patient to become involved in treatment decisions.”³

In Section 2, the principle Nonmaleficence (“do no harm”) is another principle to take into consideration. Under this principle, “The dentist has a duty to refrain from harming the patient.”³ This implies that we as professionals commit to being competent by means of minimizing any harm to our patients. Harm can take many forms, including barriers to care, limiting access to care, discrimination, perpetuation of stigma, and avoiding discussing potential risks.

Considering your own attitude and assessing your knowledge and acceptance of gender nonconforming patients is

important to avoid harming patients and to better enable you to prepare your staff members for your expectation of their behavior and conduct. If you are uncomfortable or unsure of how to proceed or if this impacts oral health care in any way, this principle would obligate you to seek a consultation or make a referral.³

In Section 3, the principle Beneficence (“do good”) is also relevant. Under this principle, “The dentist has a duty to promote the patient’s welfare.”³

This section of the ADA Code addresses the removal of barriers to health care for all patients. Oral health care as well as health care in general must be positive, helpful, and nonjudgmental. Dentists “shall conduct themselves in such a manner as to maintain or elevate the esteem of the profession.”³

Creating a welcoming environment for all patients will create a nonbiased atmosphere and will support transgender patients, contributing to overall well-being.

Cultural sensitivity training on issues affecting transgender patients—including how to ensure a welcoming environment to all of our patients, how to develop an understanding of a patient’s gender identity and preferred name and pronoun usage, and how to be nonjudgmental in the provision of care—improves the patient experience.¹

You and your staff should consider how to be sensitive by understanding people’s gender identities, which, as mentioned earlier, may be as simple as using the proper gender-neutral pronoun. This 1 change can improve the patient experience, as the patient will feel respected.⁴ A 2019 study found that study participants “reported greater satisfaction and less anxiety when referred to by their chosen name and pronouns.”⁵

In Section 4 of the ADA Code, the principle Justice (“fairness”) is directly on point. Under this principle, “The dentist has the duty to treat people fairly.”

In fact, Section 4.A. Patient Selection of the ADA Code was amended in 2018 with the following addition: “... [D]entists shall not refuse to accept patients into their practice or deny dental service to patients because of the patient’s race, creed, color, *gender, sexual orientation, gender identity*, national origin or disability (emphasis added).”³ This principle should be reiterated with staff members so that they understand the importance of the obligation.

Finally, in Section 5, the principle Veracity (“truthfulness”) should be considered:

This principle expresses the concept that professionals have a duty to be honest and trustworthy in their dealing with people. Under this principle, the dentist's primary obligations include respecting the position of trust inherent in the dentist-patient relationship, communicating truthfully and without deception, and maintaining intellectual integrity.³

Truthful communication is the best way to ensure trust; therefore, if there is any aspect of the patient's transition that may impact their oral health care, this should be discussed.

In a 2018 editorial published in *The Journal of the American Dental Association*, Ludwig and Morrison⁶ concisely summa-

rized the important role dentists play in the care of transgender patients, stating, "As dentists and dental specialists, we should continually aim for progress in our field such that we can provide comprehensive and compassionate care to all, including those patients identifying as transgender." The ADA Code serves as a guide to remind you and your staff members that a transgender patient is a patient like any other and is entitled to respect, appropriate care and treatment, truthful communication, and privacy and confidentiality. ■

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