

The ethical imperative: continuing professional development in dentistry

SADJ October 2023, Vol. 78 No.9 p429

Prof NH Wood - *BChD, DipOdont(MFP), MDent(OMP), FCD(SA), PhD*

Dentistry is not a static art; it's a dynamic science. The landscape of dental care, with its technological advancements, evolving treatment modalities and shifting patient expectations, is in perpetual flux. To maintain the relevance and efficacy of our practice, we must acknowledge this inherent dynamism. The ethical framework of our profession compels us to adapt to change and growth, both for our patients' benefit and our professional responsibility. In our noble profession, where the pursuit of knowledge is as vital as the precision of our tools, we are often faced with the question of whether we fully embrace the journey of continuing professional development (CPD). It's a question that reaches the heart of our ethical commitment to the wellbeing of our patients, the integrity of our practice and the vitality of our profession itself.

Consider the ethical ramifications of stagnant knowledge and clinical practice. When we cease our pursuit of knowledge, we risk providing our patients with suboptimal care. Ethical practice requires us to provide the best available treatments. To do otherwise, to adhere to outdated methodologies, is to renege on our professional obligations. At the very core of our ethical responsibilities lies the principle of beneficence, a commitment to promoting the wellbeing of our patients. We have pledged to alleviate suffering and enhance oral health, and we are ethically bound to employ every means at our disposal to achieve this noble goal. This makes CPD a means by which we actualise our ethical commitments to patients, and not just an arbitrary grudge pursuit.

Could we assume that dental professionals who engage in CPD provide more accurate diagnoses and exhibit greater proficiency in advanced treatment techniques? We must attempt to answer this within ourselves, perhaps by considering a scenario where a dentist who regularly participates in CPD is better equipped to diagnose and address oral health issues, thereby preventing complications that could have arisen from delayed or inaccurate treatment.

The ethical duty to prevent harm also underscores the importance of CPD. Every month we see some component of non-maleficence, the principle of "do no harm", in our Ethics contributions. This carries an implicit obligation to safeguard our patients from outdated, ineffective or harmful treatments. CPD equips us with knowledge and skills to recognise and avoid such pitfalls, and to be able to source current and valid techniques and technologies, thus ensuring that our actions are always in our patients' best interests.

In light of the scarcity of studies investigating the impact of CPD interventions in dentistry, it is reasonable to theorise that patients who received dental care from practitioners engaged in regular CPD could have a lower incidence of complications and better overall oral health outcomes than patients who do not. It is therefore probable that a patient who receives timely and well-informed dental care from a dentist committed to ongoing professional development is less likely to experience complications, highlighting the tangible benefits of CPD. However, I would imagine this could

only be true for those practitioners engaging in CPD activities with the intent to learn, integrate and improve their clinical competency and skills.

Dentists have a plethora of CPD options at their disposal to enhance their knowledge and skills, ensuring they remain at the forefront of dental practice. These activities are not only credible but also highly beneficial. These CPD interventions and activities for dentists encompass academic courses, research engagement and practical training sessions. These approaches to continuous learning empower dentists to provide advanced and evidence-based care, enhancing their clinical proficiency and patient outcomes.

Academic courses and postgraduate studies represent a stalwart component of credible CPD. Dentists can pursue master's programmes, diploma courses or other formal qualifications in various dental specialties. These structured programmes provide in-depth knowledge and clinical training, equipping dentists with additional skills and expertise. Another avenue includes peer-reviewed dental journals and research involvement that offer dentists opportunities for continuous learning. Dentists can engage in critical appraisal of research articles, stay abreast of the latest evidence-based practices and even contribute to the dental literature through research projects. This form of CPD not only enhances clinical knowledge but also encourages dentists to question and refine their practice. A dentist is more likely to adopt and successfully implement the latest evidence-based preventive measures if convinced by the evidence presented to them.

Hands-on workshops and practical training sessions form an integral part of CPD for many dentists seeking to increase their skill set. These sessions cover a wide range of topics, from advanced restorative techniques, dental implantology and orthodontics to the latest advancements in dental technology. Participating in these workshops allows dentists to hone their clinical skills, adopting new and improved methodologies in their practices. The intention is to achieve higher clinical efficiency and to be better equipped to manage complex cases.

The path of CPD is not merely a professional obligation; it is seen as an ethical imperative and a philosophical commitment. It aligns with the core principles of our profession, underscores our commitment to excellence and upholds the trust patients place in us. As ethical practitioners of dentistry, let us not only embrace CPD but celebrate it to fulfil our moral and philosophical duty to ourselves, our patients and our noble profession. As we engage in the unceasing quest for knowledge and the relentless pursuit of clinical mastery, we honour the ethical foundation upon which our profession stands and, in doing so, we renew our oath to the service of humanity through the art and science of dentistry.

FURTHER READING

1. Firmstone VR, Elley KM, Skrybant MT, Fry-Smith A, Bayliss S, Torgerson CJ. Systematic review of the effectiveness of continuing dental professional development on learning, behavior, or patient outcomes. *J Dent Ed* 2013; 77(3):300-315
2. Suliman Z, Kruger W, Pienaar JA. Continuing professional development (CPD): a necessary component in the workplace or not? *J Med Lab Sci and Tech S Afr.* 2020; 2(1):41-5