

Background

The premise for the Professional Ethics Initiative (PEI) is that more individuals with expertise in dental ethics are needed and that appropriately structured practices and organizations not only protect against ethical lapses but help create a positive ethical climate that builds a stronger profession. The initiative has an aspirational focus and character that strives to motivate, encourage, and inspire rather than regulate and penalize.

Ethics is the easiest way to raise the overall level of the profession. Above all it is the right thing for professionals to do. It is much less expensive and damaging than litigation, it is less invasive than regulation, and it is more positive than commercialism. Business research has shown that organizations that strive for high ethics enjoy greater productivity, innovation, employee loyalty, customer satisfaction, and profitability. Such firms also have higher stock prices and are better cushioned against loss in down markets.

Key organizations have worked to advance ethics in dentistry. This has been a longtime focus of the American College of Dentists (ACD). The American Dental Association (ADA) strongly promotes an ethical foundation for practice. The American Dental Education Association (ADEA) has for years promoted ethics as part of the curriculum and climate of dental schools. Ethics is the central priority of the American Society for Dental Ethics (ASDE). These key organizations and others are collaborating on a broad and sustained effort called the Professional Ethics Initiative.

Goal

The goal of the Professional Ethics Initiative is to improve the ethical climate of dentistry and enhance its ethical base.

Benefit

By accomplishing its goal the Professional Ethics Initiative promises to significantly improve the quality and standards of oral health care and the dental profession, ultimately improving the oral health of the public.

Oversight and Organization

Oversight of the Professional Ethics Initiative is by a distinguished steering committee having official representation from ACD, ADA, ADEA, ASDE, and others. The initiative encompasses four distinct programs, each having a different focus—individuals, practices, organizations, and resources.

Program 1—Individuals

Focus: Increase the number of individuals in dentistry who have ethics knowledge and training.

1. More and better-qualified dentists and others are needed to advance ethics in at least three levels:
 - a. **Advocate**—Conduct basic workshops using elementary facilitation skills; assist with development of workshops and courses
 - b. **Instructor**—Develop and conduct workshops and basic to mid-level courses; assist with development of teaching materials and advanced courses
 - c. **Scholar**—Develop and conduct advanced courses; develop teaching materials; advance scholarship and policy in dental ethics
2. Detailed descriptions of the qualifications and competencies of the levels are being developed.
3. Formal training programs are being developed for introductory (Advocate) and intermediate (Instructor) levels; degree programs suitable for higher levels (Scholar) are also being identified.
4. A group within dentistry would serve as a certifying or recognizing body for those reaching higher levels of qualification in dental ethics, i.e., the American Board of Dental Ethics.

Program 2—Practices

Focus: Implement a voluntary, no-fee program for practicing dentists to self-assess the ethical foundations of their practices and engage in a program to enhance the positive ethical climate in their offices.

1. The fundamental activity would be a practice self-assessment, guided by a package of materials containing:
 - a. A narrative overview of the program
 - b. Self-evaluation questions and instruments
 - c. Guided self-evaluation standards and procedures
 - d. Suggested improvement activities keyed to the results of the self-evaluation
2. A single-page report would be submitted for recognition (and program monitoring).
3. Practices that satisfy standards would be recognized appropriately by key organizations.
4. Practices that do not meet standards would be encouraged to make changes and be re-evaluated until the standards are met.
5. The standards will be developed and monitored by an ad hoc body.

Program 3—Organizations

Focus: Implement a voluntary program for organizations (e.g., dental schools, state associations, industry) to self-assess their ethical climates, make guided improvements, and enhance the positive ethical climates of their organizations.

1. This activity would be similar to the practice-based self-assessment and self-development of Program 2 above, but would more closely resemble the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award program; participating organizations would take an active role in documenting their ethical climates and a more customized approach, including a visiting consultant, would be used.
2. Continuous improvement is the goal of this program, although organizations that reach

certain benchmarks would be recognized by key organizations.

3. The standards would be developed and monitored by an ad hoc body.
4. A major activity would be developing a model for positive ethical climates in organizations similar to the Baldrige process, and this would be publicized in its own right.

Program 4—Resources

Focus: Gather, organize, and make available the ethics resources in dentistry and related fields to create a comprehensive repository that can be used to improve and enhance the development and delivery of ethics efforts—the Ethics Resource Clearinghouse.

1. A wide variety of ethics resources will be assembled for the clearinghouse and, where applicable, new resources will be developed.
2. The resources will be available through an online interface for use by dentally related organizations. Schools and organizations will be encouraged to share their materials with the clearinghouse. No use or sharing fees are anticipated.
3. Examples of ethics resources considered for inclusion in the clearinghouse include:
 - a. Ethics presentations and lectures on video
 - b. Online ethics courses and resources at www.dentalethics.org
 - c. Turnkey ethics courses
 - d. Ethics reference material (books, workbooks, manuals, articles, etc.)
 - e. Ethics tests, quizzes, self-assessment instruments, and inventories
 - f. Ethical dilemmas and case studies
 - g. Ethics resources for use by state and national boards
 - h. Ethics speakers bureau
 - i. Information on graduate degree programs in ethics with emphasis on online programs
4. The clearinghouse will be coordinated and administered by ACD and others.

Program Administration

Ultimately, each of the four programs of the initiative will be primarily administered by one of the key organizations; collaboration with other organizations will continue as appropriate for the specific program. These organizational responsibilities are currently unfolding. ACD will administer Programs 1 and 4. The ADA is well-suited to administer Program 2 while ADEA meshes nicely with several Programs.

Near-future Goals

The Professional Ethics Initiative has the following near-future goals:

1. Gain active participation from partners, including agreement on representation, program participation, and financial resources.
2. Complete detailed planning on the four program elements.
3. Publicize the goals and progress of the initiative to the greater dental community.
4. Secure organizational funding and seed grants and initiate targeted fundraising efforts.

Funding

The minimum fundraising goal to provide both start-up and sustaining funds for the Professional Ethics Initiative is \$5 million. Efforts are underway to raise support from a variety of sources, including the key organizations.

Contact

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PROFESSIONAL ETHICS INITIATIVE

**A Professional Collaboration
to Improve the Ethical
Climate of Dentistry**



American College of Dentists
American Dental Association
American Dental Education Association
American Society for Dental Ethics

Action indeed is the sole medium of
expression for ethics

Jane Addams