

## Codes of Ethics

Recently, the American Dental Trade Association (ADTA) adopted a "Voluntary Guideline for Business Conduct." Many health care associations and providers have already adopted similar codes, and this effort by the ADTA deserves the support and encouragement of the dental profession.

Before I go any further, I should once again make it clear that while writing this as your editor, I also at other times represent dental industry. Thus you should judge, as always when reading my views, whether you feel I have successfully controlled potential biases whenever I discuss any topic related to dental industry. I work for one of the major manufacturers of dental products, 3M Dental. I can say with good conscience that I have never given preference to 3M Dental in an editorial, or in a decision whether or not to publish a certain article, in the past 6 1/2 years since I left my university faculty appointment for dental industry. However, when one puts oneself in a position where conflict of interest is possible, it is essential to disclose that possibility.

Self-regulation of ethical standards by any group is generally preferable to outside regulation—providing that it is an honest and open attempt to raise ethical standards rather than simply a sham or a method for covering up abuse and unethical behavior. It is not difficult to recall instances of unsuccessful self-regulation. The inability of police forces, for example, to regulate and punish themselves in cases of police brutality is well documented. Self-regulation simply does not work for the police. Some will argue that it does not work for the self-protecting health care professions either—but compared to the police, where the blue wall of silence is rarely pierced, the dental profession's self-regulatory efforts are noteworthy. Still, some will no doubt view the dental manufacturers' attempts at self-regulation with some cynicism, particularly since the "guidelines" are "voluntary."

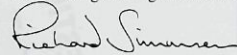
As it stands now, individual manufacturers follow their own ethical guidelines in areas such as advertising—thus considerable variance in ethical standards can be expected.

So, it may not be a smooth path that the ADTA is setting for the industry to follow. But it is to be hoped that each manufacturer will make a good-faith effort to follow the guidelines and thus raise the ethical standards of the industry.

Why? I have raised concerns previously about manufacturers who mislead the profession in their advertising. Lately I have seen two examples that would probably not pass a simple code of business conduct. In one instance a manufacturer is promoting a series of lectures. One of the "Guest Lecturers" is the President of the promoting company, but in the quite lengthy curriculum vitae for the lecturer nothing is said about his corporate involvement. His part-time private practice, even his former university "appointment" are noted in the brochure, but not his present major role as owner of the company sponsoring the lecture. Shouldn't paying attendees have this information?

Another example of "gray area" ethical activity concerns the use of an "Editorial Board" in a company-sponsored publication. I give the company full credit for an excellent, high-quality publication that is clearly identified as emanating from the company. However, the inclusion of an "editorial board" leads readers to believe that it is a peer-reviewed publication. After all, that is what editorial boards are for, is it not? Clearly, the articles could not pass peer scrutiny in independent publications since they all describe the products of one company with the product names getting star billing in the titles. It is no coincidence, I think, that all articles were written by members of the editorial board. If the group had been called "Author Listing" instead of "Editorial Board," there would be no complaints. I hope these promotional articles do not become "references" in future advertisements for the company.

All success to the ADTA in its work in developing a code of business conduct. It is an admirable first step in maintaining the high ethical standards of the industry.



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