

# Ethical questions in the information age

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Health care providers are confronted with a variety of ethical dilemmas as they strive to balance patient care with responsibilities to family, their profession, and society. This is not a new problem: One of the earliest codes of human behavior is attributed to King Hammurabi of Babylon, circa 2250 B.C.

While our concern for proper ethical behavior hasn't changed, what is new is the speed and ease with which new information can be accessed, reproduced, and even altered. The American Association of Orthodontists reflected this growing concern during its annual meeting by adopting an advisory opinion to the Code of Ethics on the disclosure of altered photographic and radiographic images. This might include a change in the color or shape of teeth, a change in the soft tissue contours, or facial morphing to deceive an examining board, a scientific audience, or the general public.

I predict the need for this type of action is only the beginning of things to come. The speed with which society is changing will most certainly create an increased number of ethical dilemmas, and our specialty will not be spared. Although action by the AAO was relatively uncomplicated in this case, knowing how to deal with more complex issues may not be so easy in the future.

Situation #1: You refer a new patient to the oral surgeon for removal of a small odontoma located between the lower central incisors. The next day the patient's mother calls back with news that her general dentist will be doing the procedure

because her insurance plan no longer covers the cost of a specialist. Do you forward the radiographs and letter even though you question the dentist's ability for this type of procedure?

Situation #2: You read an original research report on the long-term stability of palatally displaced maxillary canines. The study (by Woloshyn et al., *Angle Orthod*, 1993) concludes that the pulp canals in 21% of canines will become obliterated, that 40% will relapse, and that 75% will change color, affecting the smile. Should this become part of your informed consent the next time you talk to a new patient with a palatally displaced canine?

Situation #3: The local newspaper calls the office and wants you to participate in their health section. Their goal is to help readers become more aware of innovations in dentistry, with emphasis this month on predicting the results of orthodontic treatment using computerized imaging. Do you write an article and send it in with an assortment of the most attractive images you have available?

We are probably no closer to knowing how to deal with all ethical dilemmas than King Hammurabi was. We can promote the teaching of ethics courses in the dental schools, and we can support the AAO in its promulgation of new rules and regulations for our specialty. But it should be clear by now that this is the time to address these issues openly and in a serious way, before the lines between right and wrong become even more blurred.

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