

EDITORIAL

Ethics vs. Values, Morals and Beliefs

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Each September at optometry schools across the United States and Canada, new cohorts of students start their professional careers. The students appear enthusiastic and eager to acquire the information and skills needed to be a competent optometrist. Throughout the four years of optometric education, they will learn new terminology, knowledge

and techniques. In addition, the more abstract skill set of ethics is identified as an outcome of optometric education.

In 2000, the Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry (ASCO) identified specific entry-level competency skills and attributes that must be obtained before graduation with a doctorate degree in optometry.¹ The attributes, which were updated this year, appear in this edition of the journal. They include an understanding of professional ethics and standards and the ability to apply ethical principles in decision-making. Additionally, at commencement, optometry graduates recite the Optometric Oath, which states, “I will uphold and honorably promote by example and action the highest standards, ethics and ideals of my chosen profession and the honor of the degree, Doctor of Optometry, which has been granted me.”²

What Exactly Are We Teaching?

If ethics is a required outcome of optometric education, schools and colleges must either teach the material or accurately screen for those attributes before admission. All optometry schools teach ethics in some format. Most educators recognize the ethical responsibilities of an optometrist toward patients, which require recognizing, respecting and protecting the rights of patients.³ However, ethics as a concept can be challenging to define and teach. A Google search for “ethics” reveals more than 160 million possible Web sites.

Most definitions contain some reference to the determination of right vs. wrong, correct or incorrect practices, the study and analysis of values and standards, etc. There is some debate among educators as to whether ethics can be taught to adult learners. This is based on the assumption that by adulthood, values, morals and beliefs are already set.

In this edition’s installment of “Think Tank,” a scenario that occurred during a fourth-year externship is described. The student in this scenario apparently lied in a report to the clinical instructor that if not corrected would have resulted in falsification of a legal document, the medical record. In addition, the student demonstrated no remorse or concern when confronted with the situation. The student’s behavior and actions represented misguided and inappropriate values, morals and beliefs. Are a person’s values, morals and beliefs innately part of ethics? Can these attributes be separated from the ethics we teach?

What are we actually teaching in courses on ethics? Are we teaching right from wrong or are we teaching something else? Obviously, course curriculum varies among institutions. Reflecting on my experience, teaching ethics involves understanding and dealing with opposing points of view, recognizing dilemmas and ethical principles, developing analytical and problem-solving skills, role modeling, understanding the meaning of professional obligation and responsibility, and coping with moral ambiguity. Dilemmas, generally defined as situations in which we must choose between two equally compelling or equally unsatisfactory alternatives, are often part of clinical practice and can impact patient care. Allowing students to discuss, debate and analyze cases or scenarios that have an ethical aspect is a valuable component of optometric education.

Students’ Moral Compass

Ethics can and should be taught and modeled. A person’s morals, values and beliefs are an intricate component of

being ethical and may or may not be modifiable in adulthood. I sense that most of our students want to do the “right thing” for their patients and welcome the opportunity to learn how to do so. Unfortunately, I also sense that a very small minority of students arrive with an apathetic moral compass and an even smaller minority with an inappropriate moral compass. How can educators distinguish between different groups of students and teach those who have an apathetic or inappropriate moral compass? How can educators distinguish ethics from morals, values and beliefs? These distinctions are important if we are to achieve the ASCO goals and deal appropriately with student behavior, such as what is described in “Think Tank.”

Drs. Jeanette Sewell and Esther Han share with us their analysis of the “Think Tank” scenario in this edition, and we invite you to do the same. What is your evaluation of the situation? Was it handled properly? What are the challenges involved in dealing with this scenario? Does the faculty member have an obligation to discuss the case with the previous faculty member? What is the ethical responsibility of the clinical faculty and supervisor? Should the student’s behavior have been reported to the student’s school? Should the student have been allowed to continue in the externship program? Is the public safe in the student’s hands? Are there protocols in place to handle such situations and if so what are they? Would a course in ethics help this student? How do you define ethics? Send your responses to Dr. Aurora Denial at deniala@neco.edu, and we will print them in the next edition of the journal.

References:

1. Heath D, Daum K, DiStefano A, Haine C, Schwartz S. Attributes of students graduating from schools and colleges of optometry. *Optom Educ.* 2000 Fall;26(1):15-18.
2. American Optometric Association [Internet]. St Louis, Mo.: American Optometric Association; c2006-2011. The Optometric Oath; [cited 2011 Oct 7]. Available from: <http://www.aoa.org/x4881.xml>.
3. Bailey RN, Heitman E. An optometrist’s guide to clinical ethics. St. Louis, Mo.: American Optometric Association; c2000. Chapter 1, Ethics in clinical optometry; p. 3-10.

Thank you, Drs. Maino and Goodfellow

This edition of *Optometric Education* includes the final ASCOTech column by Drs. Dominick Maino and Geoffrey Goodfellow (page 19). As Editor of the journal, I would like to thank them for the time and effort they have put into their most informative and interesting articles on technology. Best wishes in the future.

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE UPCOMING THEME EDITION

Scholarship

Scholarly contributions by faculty are a critical component of faculty development, promotion/tenure and delivery of optometric education. Most optometric faculty have minimal formal training in professional writing, research and publication. Scholarly contributions move education forward and can significantly impact the profession. *Optometric Education* is announcing a future theme edition, which will focus on scholarship. The theme edition is scheduled for publication in 2012. Deadline for submissions is Jan. 1, 2012. We invite all educators and administrators to participate.

For additional information on the scholarship theme edition, contact Aurora Denial, OD, FAAO, at deniala@neco.edu.