

Ethics Corner

How Would You Handle This Dilemma?

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As healthcare professionals, we are faced with challenges on a regular basis – tough medical cases, the hurdles of running a practice, dealing with non-compliant patients, etc. Many of these challenges are also ethics-related and are equally important to discuss and pay attention to.

This week, I'd like to get a conversation started with you. Please read the following scenario or watch the corresponding video. Take some time to reflect on your own and then write back to let me know what you'd do in this scenario. Let's get a dialogue going.

This case scenario was developed by Dr. Eric Wachs, director of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery at Touro College of Dental Medicine, and the video was created by SPEA students at TCDM.

A 16-year-old female patient was referred to an Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeon by her general dentist for evaluation and treatment of her third molar teeth. The patient presented for consultation, at which time a written and oral medical history was obtained.

The patient and her mother reported no known medical problems and denied pregnancy. Examination and a panoramic radiograph were performed, and it was determined that it was necessary to extract the patient's two mandibular third molars. The risks and benefits of this treatment were discussed.

The patient and her mother opted for the use of intravenous sedation for the procedure. Pre-operative instructions were given, and the anticipated operative and post-operative courses were discussed.

The patient presented several weeks later for the planned extractions. The surgeon reviewed the indications for treatment and the risks and benefits of this treatment with the patient and her mother. Informed consent for the procedure was given by the patient's mother and this was documented by her signature on the consent form and witnessed by the dental assistant.

The patient was then brought to the operatory by the dental assistant. The surgeon came into the operatory and asked the patient if she had any questions before they started. The patient told the surgeon that she did not know if it was important but wanted to inform him that she was pregnant. The surgeon told the patient that he could not proceed with the planned procedure while she was pregnant because of risks to the fetus. The patient responded that it was not a problem as she was going to have the pregnancy terminated the following week. The surgeon told the patient that he could not do the procedure until the pregnancy was terminated and this was confirmed by the patient's obstetrician.

The patient told the surgeon that doing the procedure was necessary because her mother could not find out that she was pregnant or terminating a pregnancy.

Given this scenario, take a moment to ponder how you might handle this situation should you be faced with it as a dental professional. Then, let's continue the conversation in a safe and judgment-free space. All responses and thoughts are welcome. Please write back (email info@nycdentalsociety.org) to dive deeper into this ethical question. I look forward to learning how you would handle this situation.



This video demonstrates the dilemma a dentist could face with a minor and her parent. Video credit goes to the following students and faculty member of Touro College of Dental Medicine: Gabrielle Gutierrez, Mother - Hannah Salao, Assistant - Christine Bereth, and Dentist - Eric Wachs, DMD