



Q&A

The ethics of dental treatment during pregnancy

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Q I am working in a program to promote dental care for pregnant women. We are having a problem with some dentists refusing to see pregnant women until after they give birth. Is this ethical?

A Your question raises an ethical dilemma. Presumably, the dentist's refusal is based on a concern about the health of the mother and child. The dentists also may be concerned about liability if something happens to the pregnancy or the fetus.

Let us look at the facts. We then can discuss how the American Dental Association Principles of Ethics and Code of Professional

Lastly, Principle 5, Veracity (“truthfulness”), also may apply here.

Under this principle, the dentist’s primary obligations include respecting the position of trust inherent in the dentist-patient relationship, communicating truthfully and without deception, and maintaining intellectual integrity.¹

The dentist refusing to see or treat a pregnant woman because of concerns about harm to the fetus during pregnancy is not being truthful with her if he or she asserts that the reason for not treating her is because of potential harm to the fetus. As seen earlier, the scientific evidence does not support that the fetus is at risk.

A dentist with a pregnant patient must discuss all of the risks and benefits with the patient and allow her to make an informed choice. If the dentist

feels that her care is beyond his or her scope, then he or she should refer her to another dentist who can provide her with the care that she needs.

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