

Family Ties that Bind School of Dentistry – Ethics Elective Case

Faculty - Hickman & Beemsterboer, OHSU

Dr. Kristi Hanson is a newly graduated dentist who joined a successful practice as an associate with the owner of the practice, Dr. Jeff Langdon. Her parents supported her through dental school with the unspoken assumption that she would provide free dental care to them and other family members after graduation, after all she was the first person in her family to go to college. Dr. Hanson has done routine examinations and arranged for free-of-charge cleanings by her staff for family members since graduation. Recently, she discovered during a routine visit that her older sister, Jessica, required extensive dental work including several large molar restorations that had deteriorated quite a bit since the last time Dr. Hanson had seen her. The buccal and mesial aspects of #30 were quite involved and required a temporary filling because Jessica had an appointment she did not want to miss.

When Jessica called to complain about mouth pain, Dr. Hanson phoned in a prescription for 12 tablets of Tylenol with codeine. Jessica went through this medication quickly and then called her little sister to request a refill, but Dr. Hanson refused. She did not believe her sister needed additional pain medicine, in part because she had always thought Jessica was a bit of a spoiled whiner.

Jessica called Dr. Langdon to complain about her pain on Dr. Hanson's day off. When he looked at her chart he found inadequate documentation to fully understand the situation, so he asked Jessica to come in for an examination. He found an infection that was responsible for Jessica's continued pain and prescribed an antibiotic. Following this visit, he instructed his office manager to bill Jessica for the time, materials, and resources required for the dental procedures she underwent previously as well as his time, though Jessica was not charged for Dr. Hanson's time. Dr. Langdon told Dr. Hanson the next day that their practice could not afford to write-off costly treatments for family and criticized her for prescribing a narcotic without an examination and thus missing the infection. A few days later, Jessica sent a nasty email, calling her sister a fraud and threatening to report her to the dentistry board for malpractice if she did not take care of the bill. Dr. Hanson was upset with her sister who she viewed as ungrateful and shared her frustrations with her parents, complaining that many of Jessica's troubles, including the recent infection, were due to laziness and poor self-care. Her parents angrily reminded her that she owed it to the family to provide free care.

What should Dr. Hanson do to resolve this mess?