

**“Ethics in the Dental Profession”**  
**White Coat Ceremony**  
**DDS Class of 2025 / IDS Class of 2025 / DH Class of 2024**  
**University of the Pacific, Arthur A. Dugoni School of Dentistry**  
**Palace of Fine Arts Theatre, San Francisco, California**  
**July 29, 2023**

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**Assistant Professor, Department of Diagnostic Sciences**

Dear Dugoni students—today is a symbolic day of pride and rite of passage for you. A passage to join the ranks of your future profession.

I hope you will enjoy this day along with your dear family and friends.

The White Coat Ceremony usually marks the start of a point in your journey when you earn the awesome responsibility of treating real people; patients; other human beings who place their trust in you to do the “right thing” for them.

Trusting you to do the “Right Thing” is the heart of what your ethical obligations are about.

This ceremony is symbolic. But we must take symbols seriously to understand what they stand for and why they exist. Wearing the White Coat of a healthcare professional is about a privilege, and not a right.

A healthcare professional earns the privilege to enjoy a presumptive trust from the patients. Trust with their body and their mind depending on the ailment or need, and reliance on the knowledge, skill, and discipline of the provider.

And today I ask myself if I were to give you some advice about “Ethical Practice” of Dentistry, what would that be?

Start by confirming your commitment and intent to always act ethically and professionally. Your intent is the necessary step before taking any conscious action. Intent foreshadows decisions and the practice that follows.

Remember that your professional life and training at our school reflects the philosophy of “Humanism” and reflects the ‘Head, Heart, and Hands’ way of learning that our school embraces.

Ethics in your profession arises and thrives in your HEART, supported by your Mind and the relevant knowledge you require, and the skills you will practice with your ands as doctors of dentistry and certified dental hygienists.

Mark your future practice with professionalism, ethical behavior, empathy, and communication skills that enforce your core values. Remember this and adopt it deeply, because without this you will be no more than “greatly skilled technicians and business people.” What makes you a complete professional is the trust your patients will place in you every time they sit in an operatory-chair and place themselves with vulnerability in your hands. You will have a fiduciary duty to each of them, every time they come for a visit to your office.

Remember the oath you take today is inspired by the Hippocratic Oath. The words of that oath have changed over time, but its intent and heart have not.

I will quote a select few words from the *Modern Hippocratic Oath* relevant to ethical practice:

*“I will remember that there is art to medicine as well as science, and that warmth, sympathy, and understanding may outweigh the surgeon’s knife or the chemist’s drug.*

*I will not be ashamed to say, ‘I know not,’ nor will I fail to call on my colleagues when the skills of another are needed for a patient’s recovery.*

*I will respect the privacy of my patients, for their problems are not disclosed to me that the world may know.”*

These words speak to both “Humility” and “Honesty.”

These words speak to your duty of TRUST and keeping CONFIDENCE of your patients. What enables you to deliver on these duties is learning HOW to make ethical decisions. Remember the simple definition I shared with you in class that “Ethics is the Systematic Study of Right and Wrong.” An ethical choice is not always between two benign and good alternatives. Ethical dilemmas will force you to choose between a bad and a worse in many cases. You need to be ready to make those tough decisions.

I wish you the best of luck as you get closer to achieving the honor of becoming dental professionals; today, celebrate this important milestone with your friends, colleagues and family. Thank you.