

## Editorial - Educational

# Professionalism

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**“Professional competence is the habitual and judicious use of communication, knowledge, technical skills, clinical reasoning, emotions, values, and reflection in daily practice for the benefit of the individual and community being served”, Epstein and Hundert<sup>1</sup>.**

Every medical doctor knows about professionalism, and all doctors aspire to be professional at all times during their career. However, it is apparent that despite these noble aspirations, we often fall short of this ambition. Human failings, fatigue, insecurity and financial concerns can and do conspire to prevent this ambition. Nevertheless, we owe our patients, colleagues, and students a sincere commitment to make every effort to act in a professional manner at all times.

So, what is professionalism and how relevant is it to the practice of medicine in the modern world? How can we ensure not only its survival, but also perfect it amidst the challenges of everyday clinical practice.

There are many definitions of professionalism, some of which are specific not only to medicine. However, certain generic truths can be applied to all professions. A true professional is easy to recognize, acts responsibly and is appropriately accountable, exercises professional probity, is committed to the survival and progression of his discipline by successive planning and is dedicated to teaching, training and research. The true professional is aware that professionalism implies a spirit of altruism, improves with age and experience, and in medicine, is at all times patient-centered and not just disease-centered. Medical professionals belong to a professional body and submit to self-regulation (not over-regulation) to ensure standards that support doctors and protect patients. They do not close ranks when things go wrong, and more importantly, they do not generate mistruths about any situation or colleague; they should always be reluctant to criticize colleagues behind their backs.

If we are thus aware of the importance of professionalism, why do we, as practitioners, so often express concern over the emerging threats to professionalism and the apparent professional decay that we witness with increasing frequency? Unfortunately, the profession (and professionalism) is under threat and faces significant challenges that can affect not only patient care, but also the very core of that which makes us professional doctors. Is it the case that we are prepared to acknowledge its importance but at the same time not really prepared to practice it?

Recognizing its importance is in many respects the first step along a path to professionalism that should begin the first day of medical school. Signing in and attending our undergraduate lectures, classes, and tutorials, and working to be the best we can be are the keys to embedding professionalism in our consciousness. Medical schools teach this by default, but it also needs formal instruction.

These undergraduate concepts extend naturally into our professional lives when we apply the same principles to getting to work on time, treating our patients with respect, to the best of our ability and preserve confidentiality. As a trainee, we must not only respect our patients, but also our colleagues and seniors. All too often, we hear of trainee doctors being critical of the opinions of seniors and offering their own version of a patient care-plan. As a surgical trainee, many years ago, we could never imagine being critical of those with years of training and experience (our registrars, senior registrars and consultants) and certainly, we would never have countenanced such a privileged or inappropriate conversation.

The information highway and its ready availability has generated vast numbers of “experts” but there is still no substitute for experience and interpretive action/advice based on such experience. That must always command respect and should never be undermined. It is of course vitally important that everyone has the ability and opportunity to express an opinion, but this could be

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done at clinical handover, rounds or grand rounds; it is never behind another's back. There are well-established protocols to address the colleague at risk, but we should never listen to idle gossip about our colleagues, this would be highly unprofessional! It is also inappropriate to generate or propagate misinformation about a colleague for self-gain. Sadly, the profession regularly witnesses and absorbs such behavior on an increasingly frequent basis.

As we progress through our careers, we can face ethical and moral challenges that may be difficult to resolve in the absence of resilience and a strong sense of professionalism. We are increasingly immersed in a financial market-place which can sadly influence our professionalism and ethical performance. The profession, in general, has specific guidelines to advertising, good clinical practice, getting it right and apologizing when things go wrong, as they inevitably do from time to time.

Professionalism expects us to keep pace with all policies resident in our institution and of course to implement them. We are not eligible to independently alter such policies and bend them to our own definition. Underpinning all of our clinical and professional behavior is the care of our patient, who is always the most important person in a hospital, deserving our attendance at any hour of the day and of our best efforts to save his/her life or make that life more comfortable. We are obliged to keep abreast of current knowledge, and we are normally expected to contribute to this knowledge through published clinical and scientific research.

We have been fortunate to have worked with and alongside great colleagues, some of the pillars of surgery, medicine and nursing. Apart from their great technical skills, diagnostic acumen, humility and caring attitudes, they were all consummate professionals. The majority of doctors are caring, motivated, hard-working and are in this profession for the good they bring to society. There will always be cultural issues that tend to cloud matters, but professionalism is not a matter of geography. It would be wonderful if each of us was to be remembered not only as a great teacher, surgeon, doctor, nurse but as a true professional. Not only is this our greatest success (legacy), but also our greatest epitaph.

Now, let us address our new colleagues who have recently joined the profession. It is advised to adhere to guidelines and at all times display honesty and integrity. Never ever falsify information or cheat and behave unethically in the hospital and the community; resist being attracted to famed aggressive or adventurous unethical behavior.

Dealing with the patient is the most important aspect of your profession. Display at all times respect for your patient's dignity and rights. Never get tempted to look down at your patient, poor or rich, powerful or weak. Always make the utmost efforts to establish rapport with patients or families, even if there is a language barrier. Be sensitive to the patients' or families' feelings, needs, or wishes, even if it is outrageous or out of expectation, and demonstrate appropriate empathy and respect for patient autonomy. Never reveal patient's information without consent or court order or insurance agreement.

It is often challenging to maintain a professional demeanor under stress, but if practiced, you will be able to control your emotions and not be verbally hostile, abusive or dismissive. You might counter that by saying that you cannot change nature; that is not true; nowadays, courses are available, even online, for anger and self-management.

In the society, you must recognize the professional boundaries for patient relationships. Engaging in romantic or sexual relationships with patients is disastrous to your profession; in Europe, the professional might lose the license to practice. In addition, never misuse professional position for personal gain. Sexual harassment by a professional is serious unacceptable conduct in the hospital or outside. In KHUH, sexual harassment is considered a very serious offense to our profession, and if proven, in most cases, would result in termination. In sexual harassment of female patients, we are plagued with a culture of silence (Middle East), where a female patient is scared to complain because of giving herself a bad name in the society. Our advice to our colleagues, physicians and nurses is never be tempted by a patient's advances because you might be lured into a trap. In several studies, nurses and physicians occasionally tend to react passively and not attempt to stop the sexual advances by patients<sup>2,3</sup>.

In the society, never abuse alcohol or drive intoxicated and avoid being arrogant or insolent. A professional should always follow generally accepted professional norms in dress code; following fashion is tempting, but remember that the society looks at professionals with a magnifier and expects them to be a role model in their profession and the society.

Professionals have limits and should be aware of their own inadequacies and when to seek help from an equal or senior colleague/s. As a junior, you must recognize that you work under supervision and at all times, your senior is accountable for your actions and management when duly informed, even in lawsuit. Therefore, recognize your own limits, and identify the conditions to seek help. Do not resist instruction or feedback and accept responsibility for failure or errors; this will help you grow and improve.

A professional is dependable, creative and a leader who initiates action; he completes tasks in a timely fashion and does not need reminders to accomplish his academic responsibilities; he is always available for his patients, responds appropriately to clinical service and recognizes that the patient is the main focus our profession is built on. Try to imagine a hospital without patients, what would be the function of physicians and the administration...Nothing.

Professional behaves appropriately with other members of the team and communicates properly and promptly. It is not only required from the professional to be sensitive to the needs, feelings, wishes of patients but also to the healthcare team members. The junior

we train is a member of our family and should be considered as such throughout his career. A professional will impart his teaching and knowledge to the members of the health care team. The members we train today are the future leaders of our profession.

At this juncture, I would like my colleagues to review what has been proposed by the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) in professionalism, which is applicable to every specialty during residency or fellowship training<sup>2</sup>, see table 1.

**Table 1: The Professionalism Requirements of the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education<sup>4</sup>**

<b>Residents must demonstrate a commitment to carrying out professional responsibilities, adherence to ethical principles, and sensitivity to a diverse patient population. Residents are expected to:</b>
Demonstrate respect, compassion, and integrity; a responsiveness to the needs of patients and society that supersedes self-interest; accountability to patients, society, and the profession; and a commitment to excellence and on-going professional development
Demonstrate a commitment to ethical principles pertaining to provision or withholding of clinical care, confidentiality of patient information, informed consent, and business practices
Demonstrate sensitivity and responsiveness to patients' culture, age, gender, and disabilities

A medical professional should be well acquainted with information technology, such as the use of the internet, Medline, email and access of medical data bases. In addition, he is a member of academic society and must subscribe to and read medical journals. The moment you graduate from medical school, you are expected to behave professionally.

## CONCLUSION

**The main criteria of a professional are the following: responsibility, honesty, respect, and fairness. We act responsibly with our colleagues, patients and the society; honesty in learning, teaching, and research and never accept or justify dishonest conduct; respect one another, the educational process and the institution; fairness in all our dealings with others. Trust is attained when you achieve harmony with your colleagues and the community.**

**Potential Conflicts of Interest:** None.

**Competing Interest:** None.

**Sponsorship:** None.

**Acceptance Date:** 28 July 2017.

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