

MEDICAL EDUCATION

Medical Students Speak: A Two-Voice Comment on Learning Professionalism in Medicine

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We are two medical students. For one of us, medical school is just beginning; for the other, it is coming to an end. Our experiences are different, but our message is the same. Professionalism is a vital component in the field of medicine. Characteristics such as trustworthiness, compassion, integrity, honesty, leadership, and social responsibility must be embraced by the next generation of doctors so the future healthcare system will be one that patients and physicians admire and respect. To reach this goal, it is important to understand how medical students today view professionalism and how such a construct is integrated into medical education. We hope to provide insight into this area by reflecting on the lessons we have learned regarding professionalism in medical school. Professionalism, like the medical field itself, is a life-long learning process. By encouraging this process early in medical training, future doctors will be able to provide their patients with highest quality care. Clin. Anat. 19:415–418, 2006. © 2006 Wiley-Liss, Inc.

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INTRODUCTION

Professionalism: society expects it and deserves it of physicians. Physicians expect it of their colleagues and assume they have it themselves. Yet, it is only recently that a focus on actively teaching professionalism to students has come into the spotlight (Hilton and Slotnick, 2005). In 2000, Swick proposed the first normative definition of medical professionalism, in that physicians must (a) subordinate their own interests to those of others; (b) adhere to high ethical and moral standards; (c) respond to societal needs; (d) allow their behaviors to reflect a social contract with their community; (e) evince core humanistic values, including honesty and integrity, caring and compassion, altruism and empathy, respect for others, and trustworthiness; (f) exercise accountability for themselves and for their colleagues; (g) demonstrate a continuing commitment to excellence; (h) exhibit a commitment to scholarship and to advancing their field; (i) deal with high levels of complexity and uncertainty; (j) and reflect upon their actions and decisions (Swick, 2000). The question now arises regarding how and where these lessons of professionalism are best conveyed. Bland on paper, a lecture on these points would be arguably duller. In this commentary, we suggest that it is through the di-

verse and unexpected venues of example and self-reflection that professionalism's tenets shine.

We are two voices: one at the start of medical school, one at the end. Together, we reflect on lessons in professionalism, as it goes beyond the artificial constructs of syntax and into the depths of our spirits and our humanity.

VOICE ONE

Halfway through my medical school interview, I was asked to define professionalism. This was the first school, and only school, that asked me that question, and to be perfectly honest, I was caught a little off guard. At the time, I was still finishing my senior year at a large undergraduate university. Never before had I talked about or written a paper regarding the meaning of professionalism. Since this medical school was first on my list, I knew that I had to

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come up with something. Therefore, I just said what was in my heart. A professional needs to be honest, caring, possess integrity and humility. The actions of a professional at work need to be congruent with those actions displayed at home and in the community.

Nine months later, I was sitting in a classroom in that same medical school. However, this time, it was the first day of anatomy class, and I was receiving a lecture on professionalism. Finally, after all of those months, I was able to get my interviewer's opinion on what it meant to be a professional. Fortunately, my definition was quite similar to what was being said in class. However, I also realized that I had a lot to learn.

Medical school was not the easiest transition for me. I had a great group of classmates who were very supportive, but I found myself constantly focused on my school work and always working alone. I used a similar strategy in my undergraduate education, and it earned me a perfect grade point average. However, it seemed to be failing me in medical school.

Fortunately, as the year went on, I received two wonderful pieces of advice. First, I was told to study with someone. Second, I was told to get involved with an activity in the community, such as tutoring local high school students. Hesitantly, but diligently, I took these two pieces of advice, and it was the best thing I could have done.

When reflecting on that advice, I realized that studying with someone has taught me a lot about professionalism. Medicine is no longer a field in which one can work in isolation from all other medical professionals. Medicine is a field of collaboration, and the best place for a first year medical student to begin this process of collaboration is to work with one's own colleagues. As I studied with my classmate, I learned that there are times when I am the teacher and there are times when I am the student. It gave me the opportunity to gain confidence (while in the role of a teacher), and it gave me the opportunity to gain humility (while in the role of a student). Both of these qualities are needed in a medical professional, and I was pleased to have been acquainted with them early.

Furthermore, I also found that my work as a tutor for high school students was closely related to professionalism. For example, during the first part of my school year, everything I was doing was for myself. If there was an event that took time from my study schedule, I simply would not participate in that event. However, as the school year continued, I learned that as a future medical professional, I have responsibilities to my community as well. In medi-

cine, there is a "social contract" that exists between physicians and the society they serve. Society gives physicians special rights and responsibilities in hopes that physicians will demonstrate altruism in their community. Therefore, it is important that doctors give back to the society that supports them. By investing my time to help younger students, I was providing a helpful service to the community while also gaining experience on how to interact with adolescents. Tutoring allowed me to understand what issues adolescents are facing today, since my assistance pertained to issues both in and out of the classroom. Because of my experiences in dealing with adolescents, I feel more equipped to serve that population of people in a medical role as well.

During the second half of my first year, I had the privilege of combining these various aspects of professionalism into a meaningful event, called the Convocation of Thanks. The Convocation of Thanks is a student-organized event that gives the medical students and faculty the opportunity to say thank you to the families and loved ones of those who donated their body to science. While organizing this event, I encountered many components of professionalism. My leadership and collaboration skills were constantly being tested. It was a challenge to coordinate six different subcommittees to come together and create a program for 400 people. Fortunately, I found that the breadth of my classmates' talents could be utilized to generate a wonderful memorial service. Without help from them, the event could not have been a success.

The Convocation also demonstrated social responsibility. Because my classmates and I were able to study the human body because of someone else's generous donation, we knew we had the responsibility to recognize and honor those who made that opportunity possible. The Convocation gave all first year medical students the opportunity to show compassion and respect to the families and loved ones of those who donated their body. The appreciation and kind comments the families had for us afterwards is something we will remember forever.

Finally, I believe a great deal of professionalism can be learned by watching one's professors and mentors. From my personal experience, many of the medical educators treat students as personal colleagues. Often, the educators are renowned physicians, but they are always willing to listen to the concerns and ideas of first year medical students.

To me, this conveys a sense of respect, courtesy, humbleness, and patience, which are all good qualities found in a professional. By watching others demonstrate these qualities, I believe the concept of

professionalism will be more easily internalized by students. It has been well over one year since I was asked to define professionalism during my medical school interview. After reflecting on all that I have learned since that time, I realize that professionalism cannot be summarized in a single definition, and it is not necessarily something that can easily and only be taught in the classroom. Professionalism is something I have learned through time, and I will continue to learn as I move forward with my medical education. . .

VOICE TWO

. . .In fact, the culmination of medical school is the honor of reciting an oath.

I swear by Apollo the physician, and Aesculapius, and Hygeia, and Panacea. . . that I will fulfill, according to my ability and judgment, this Oath and covenant (Oath of Hippocrates). . .

Whether the Oath of Hippocrates, or a more modern counterpart, most graduates of medical degree programs swear an oath of honesty, compassion, morality, respect, and responsibility. The words serve as a guide to the personal and solemn nature of our lifelong commitment to patients. In essence, we swear an oath to the practice of professionalism.

It is my duty to care for the individual and the community. . . (Mayo Medical School Oath).

Internship is the “critical period” in our training. It is a time of formation. For the first time, we are truly responsible. We bear the fault of mistakes made, and the glow of hard-earned success. We have patients who identify us as “my doctor.” As interns, we enter that sleepless, full-hearted journey which forges for each of us, our art of medicine.

The practice of medicine is both art and science. The wisdom of my patients and colleagues will guide me in the art (Mayo Medical School Oath).

I met a young man this summer, admitted for asthma. He was one of those sixteen-year olds at whom we cringe and leave it at that. Unkempt hair with a liberality of grease and fading purple dye; teeth flecked with chew, and the waistband of this Fubu jeans hanging far past any length of discretion. Between labored breaths, he snarled, “don’t go putting your finger up anywhere it doesn’t belong.” I pulled out my stethoscope to listen to his lungs and didn’t deign to reply.

He continued to fume throughout his hospital stay, and he only returned to see me in clinic the following week because he was failing school and it happened to be time for his sheriff-mandated yearly physical. He remained surly as ever, and spat his

chew in the sink as he replied in monosyllabic indifference. I was relieved when our half hour was up and thought to myself how lucky I would be if I never again saw this young man who was not going to change.

Three months later, he skipped the asthma follow-up he’d been scheduled, as well as the appointment to see a counselor for smoking cessation. I called him to remind that he’d missed his appointments. I left the number for the scheduling desk, hung up the receiver, and guiltily breathed a sigh of relief.

Thus, you can imagine my surprise when his name re-appeared on my calendar two months later: “asthma follow-up.” You can even more imagine my astonishment when he showed up for the slot.

I walked into the room, and was once again assaulted by the familiar smell of stale tobacco. Yet, the smile on his face was new. As I took in bedraggled hair, sagging pants and bright clean shoes, I suppose the surprise on my face was clear, because he grinned even wider, handed me a copy of a report card with B’s and said, “I bet you didn’t believe in me.”

He was right. He’d had more faith in me than I’d had in him. I had no idea he had cared when I’d brainstormed ways for him to quit chew and do better in school; that it had mattered when I called because he didn’t show up. I realized my prejudice. He had listened to me better than I had listened to him.

I will be a partner to improve the quality of [my patients’ lives] through good health. I will not discriminate. I will protect the vulnerable. . . (Mayo Medical School Oath).

When we treat a patient who is strange or long-winded, has an accent or smells bad, or for some reason triggers our prejudice, we run the risk of “tuning out.” We think, somehow, that if we are not psychiatrists, we are paid to do something other than listen to this undesirable individual. We keep our pagers on audible alert. We check watches and read over calendars. In these ways, we learn to silence our patients by making them worry that they are pestering us, taking us from our work.

Yet, paramount in all our specialties, we are trained to be listeners. We are trained to hear people’s stories, think about them in the context of others we have heard, and then share those reflections with our patients. We are partners to our patients. The intimacy of this heart-to-heart is the crux of our professionalism as doctors. The dialogue we keep with our patients sets the stage for trust, follow-up, and allows the technicalities of remedy to take place. Thus, it is our prerogative to be aware of

our human faults, appreciate the honor of alliance and “tune back in.”

My profession is an honored one and I will not violate the trust society has placed in me (Mayo Medical School Oath).

Let us be proud of what we do, but not arrogant. Let us be confident enough to be humble, as humble before our successes as we are before our mistakes. Let us appreciate our patients and colleagues as deeply as we ought, and let us not hold grudges against each other or ourselves when we err as humans and need a second chance.

REFLECTION

A first year student and a fourth year student: professionalism is cultivated in the individual, not in his degree. Our oath is a reminder of what we discover

along the way. Lessons to be learned from the greenest student may be as valuable as those from the most seasoned practitioner. These lessons are taught beyond the classroom, and they are realized in our hearts. As physicians and physicians-to-be, it is our obligation not to be complacent, but to be honest and caring, have integrity and be humble. We are many voices, yet we ring as one.

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