

Challenges To Professionalism Amongst Medical Students in Their Undergraduate Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

Practicing medicine is a stressful and complex process, wherein a lot is expected of the doctors and they have to be professional in their approach while discharging their duties. Acknowledging the importance of professionalism in medical practice, the practice of teaching and assessing professionalism has begun in most medical institutions. Even though a humble beginning has been made, in various settings it has been reported that medical students and/or doctors don't behave professionally in their workplace. A wide range of challenges involving different stakeholders have been identified that play their part in hindering the medical students and practicing doctors to discharge their role as a professional. To conclude, professionalism is an important trait for all medical students to become successful in their clinical practice. However, the pathway to train medical students in professionalism is full of challenges. The need of the hour is to identify these challenges and devise solutions to overcome them to strengthen the overall process of training and assessment.

Keywords: Professionalism, Students, Teachers, Medical education

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INTRODUCTION

Practicing medicine is a stressful and complex process, wherein a lot is expected of the doctors and they have to be professional in their approach while discharging their duties. As the professionalism level of doctors in many ways determine the quality of the health care delivered, it won't be wrong to state that medical institutions should take specific interventions to prepare students for their future role as a physician.¹ In-fact, professionalism has been acknowledged as one of the core competencies expected of a medical graduate upon completion of their training, and thus it is extremely important to train and assess the students on various aspects of professionalism throughout their training period.¹ We must realize that the way in which these medical students behave in clinical practice upon completion of their training will determine the trustworthiness of the overall medical profession.

Professionalism and medical education: In general, professionalism consists of professional knowledge, professional attitude, altruism, accountability, excellence, duty, honour, integrity, and respect for others, but it is the behavior that has always been regarded as the primary representation of professionalism.² Acknowledging the importance of professionalism in medical practice, the practice of teaching and assessing professionalism has begun in most medical institutions. Even though a humble beginning has been made, in various settings it has been reported that medical students and/or doctors don't behave professionally in their workplace.^{2,3} This unprofessional behavior has accounted for serious implications for the relationship between doctors and patients and the trust of society in the health care delivery system.¹⁻³

Challenges in maintaining professionalism: We have to acknowledge that in order to be a professional, it requires a time investment, as the professional relationship between medical students and patient does not develop just like that. In addition, the students have to be extremely motivated from within to develop and maintain a relationship on a professional note.^{2,4} Moreover, many healthcare professionals have a feeling that in order to be professional with the patients they have to impose their views on them for which they are not ready and thus remain reluctant.^{3,4} A wide range of challenges concerning medical students have been identified that plays a defining role in preventing medical students to discharge their role as a professional.³⁻¹⁰

Medical education-related challenges: It is quite obvious that in order to develop the attribute of professionalism amongst medical students, they have to be exposed to patients in routine clinical care either in ward, out-patient department or in community settings.¹ The teachers have to understand that though there is no specified syllabus for professionalism, the teacher should ensure that an adequate

number of clinical scenarios are given to the students and their responses are obtained.^{1,2} Further, we should encourage or develop a system, wherein resident as teachers (near peer-learning) is envisaged, as students have better acceptance owing to the limited age gap and lack of fear. Moreover, only training imparted for professionalism will not deliver rich dividends, unless they are supplemented with periodic assessments, constructive feedback about the performance, and encouragement of reflections.¹⁻³

Challenges faced by the medical students: From the perspective of medical students, the very fact that being either not aware or having unrealistic expectations from the branch before they enter the medical college emerges as an important challenge.⁴ Once the students enter the course, the absence of a system wherein they are informed about the roles and responsibilities expected of them turns out to be another major problem.^{4,5} Once the students are informed about the same, they develop their individual goals and try to work harder to not only attain them but stay professional as well. Allocation of multiple responsibilities within a limited time span tends to compromise their professional approach to deal with the given work.^{5,6}

The presence of negative role models (viz. teachers who are non-cooperative, tends to complain about everything, criticize colleagues, humiliate people around them, and are generally not much productive due to poor knowledge/skills) within their education set-ups plays a detrimental role and does not aid them in their pathway to become professional. In addition, reports or evidence suggesting that members of the community tend to have a negative approach towards their profession makes it difficult for these budding minds to digest it and they lose all motivation to be professional.⁷ Further, observing unethical behaviors from the healthcare team and the presence of a gap (between what is being taught to them and what is actually practiced in real settings), once again, turns out to be a major challenge for the medical students.⁷

Moreover, insufficient confidence (which in turn has its roots from the limited acquisition of medical knowledge and skills), while dealing with patients tends to negatively impact their professional behavior. Further, some students might feel superior or inferior to others and thus it becomes tricky for them to be professional under all circumstances.⁴⁻⁶ In addition, it is a bitter truth that despite years of hard work, efforts, and leading a busy & stressful life, a significant proportion of them fail to achieve better prospects in life and family, and thus that becomes a major challenge for them to be professionals.^{4,5}

Challenges faced by medical teachers: In general, the job profile of medical teachers is quite complex, wherein they have to transform fresh students into competent healthcare professional, who are also good in multiple non-cognitive attributes, and more often than not are being taught as a part of the hid-

den curriculum.⁸ In order to train students in the domain of professionalism, teachers generally encounter a number of challenges, such as lacking the confidence to meet the needs of different students, shortage of time to train students, lack of support from the authorities, irregular assessment of professionalism, a lacuna in the supervisory system, frustration at the workplace, inability to maintain a balance between personal and professional life, limited opportunities for recreation due to workload, inability to stay calm under testing conditions (which can be perceived as a negative role model by the students), etc.^{2,3,8}

Challenges posed by patients and community:

The primary goal of a doctor is to ensure better health outcomes and wellbeing of patients and their family members. Considering that in order to accomplish this, a doctor essentially requires collaboration from the patients and their family members, so that we can have good teamwork and move forward in terms of attainment of better patient outcomes.^{1,2} However, the absence of trust or respect towards the doctor jeopardizes the entire doctor-patient relationship and makes it extremely challenging for the health authorities.³⁻⁶ Any kind of doubt or uncertainty from the patient perspective makes it extremely challenging for the doctors to stay professional realistically. Further, lack of awareness amongst members of the community about the way healthcare services is delivered can also impact the development of professionalism among medical students.⁹

In addition, it becomes quite difficult for medical students to effectively communicate with those patients who are already irritated or have previous bad experiences with health care facilities. Further, most of the patients don't accept medical students as a member of the healthcare team and thus they are very much reluctant to support them even in basic things like giving proper history or cooperation for physical examination. At times, it has even been reported that the questions asked by male medical students are more appropriately responded to by the patients when compared with the female students.⁹ All such kinds of behavior from patients or community tends to have a discouraging impact on the professional approach of medical students. Also, we cannot rule out the possibility that a doctor who deals with their patients in a compassionate manner is often not taken seriously, and thus they have to be rigid while interacting with patients for better clinical outcomes.^{3,9}

Potential solutions: Each of the identified challenges has its solution hidden within the problem and can be sorted out by the adoption of a systematic approach.²⁻¹² Medical teachers should ensure that students are given an adequate number of learning opportunities to learn professionalism and supplement the same with regular assessments to give them an inference about their learning progress.¹⁰ The stu-

dent-related challenges can be effectively dealt with by organizing a foundation course for the students upon their entry into the course. During this course, students are explained about their roles and responsibilities and also made to understand the various competencies expected of them upon the completion of the overall course.^{11,12} In the subsequent years of training, additional learning opportunities like Electives, Case-based discussion, Attitude, Ethics and Communication module training in a longitudinal manner can be utilized to continue the teaching on professionalism.

In order to deal with the challenges pertaining to teachers, the best approach is to train them about the scope, need, and ways to teach and assess professionalism. The Medical Education Unit of the institution can organize training programs for the benefit of the teachers and to empower them to train students on professionalism. It is very much essential that medical students should be trained in the domain of communication skills and they should subsequently work along with the patients and their family members in the form of a team.⁹ In addition, the medical students should also be trained about the need to maintain professional relationship with their peers, staff, nurses, teachers, etc., who all are involved in the health care delivery.

The medical teachers can take the lead in making patients believe that the medical students are an integral part of the health team and patients should cooperate with them in all possible ways. There arises the scope and significance of delivery of hidden curriculum to the medical students, wherein the teachers use their experience and behaviors to train medical students about different attributes required and expected of a health care professional. These attributes are not mentioned explicitly in the curriculum document, nevertheless, the teachers should orient the students about the essential aspects of a professional behavior. This will significantly improve the relationship between patients and budding doctors.^{8,10}

CONCLUSION

To conclude, professionalism is an important trait for all medical students to become successful in their clinical practice. However, the pathway to train medical students in professionalism is full of challenges related to different stakeholders. The need of the hour is to identify these challenges and devise solutions to overcome them to strengthen the overall process of training and assessment.

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