

Editorial

Medical Professionalism

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Professionalism is the basis of Medicine's contract with society: it demands placing the interests of patients above those of the physician, setting and maintaining standards of competence and integrity, and providing expert advice to society on matters related to health. Medicine is considered a profession, and physicians we call ourselves professionals. The full realization of the promise of all physicians can only be realized, if we fulfill the obligations attendant upon the professional standing granted to us by the larger community^[1]. The question to all of us at present is whether the preceding activities by themselves fulfill the criteria for claiming the status of profession in Medicine, or, is more required?

At present, the medical profession is confronted by an explosion of technology, changing market forces, problems in health care delivery and globalization. As a result, physicians find it difficult to meet their responsibilities to patients and society. In these circumstances, we need to look for the fundamental and universal principles and values of medical professionalism which remain ideals to be pursued by all physicians.

The usual understanding of professionalism means an occupation based on prolonged study of a body of knowledge, self-regulation, autonomy in practice, and recognized expertise. The main purpose of the occupation is to provide a public service based on fundamental principles. First, principle of privacy of patient's welfare to serve his interest. Second, principle of respect for patient's autonomy. Third, principle of social justice including the fair distribution of health care resources^[2,3].

Three essential elements of professionalism are necessary requirements^[4]. First, physicians must be devoted to the work of providing health care. They offer high quality services, avoid the appearance that they are devoted to their own interests rather than to the interest of others and there is a general agreement that patient's interest must take precedence over physician's financial self-interest.

Second, public profession of health care values. Health care values focus on the public as well as the individual. Physician who is devoted to medical service is a form of public profession of values, through which he is committed to certain standards of care^[5]. Third, negotiation regarding professional values and other social values. This process is also called a social contract between physicians and the public. The process fosters patient-centered care by including each patient's health goals in decision making. Also, this process of negotiation can make clear professionals obligations to meet public needs. The challenge for physicians is to be accountable to the public and its changing values while protecting health care values.

In what ways might professionalism be promoted and implemented? There are a range of possible strategies^[6]. First, expand the teaching of professionalism in medical schools and in postgraduate training programs and to have professional societies become more explicit about the norms and standards to be required. These professional resolutions have some impact on individual behavior. Second, professional and all medical societies could require rather than recommend standards of behavior, including service. One could imagine that, like continuing medical education, service to make groups of people would be required to maintain certification or renew their license to practice or even provide it for their promotion. Third, professional associations could form alliances with consumer groups to accomplish goals that neither can realize separately^[7]. Some suggested that medicine might go public and become much more of a partner to other fields and social interests. For example, Medicine as a profession and its funds can join efforts by consumer groups and medical groups to improve the quality of care, implement professional standards, and provide care to the underserved population. Fourth, the medical schools and postgraduate training curriculum should be

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changed to include lectures on professionalism and skills necessary to promote it. Fifth, professional societies must be persuaded to expand the agenda for which they believe and advocate. They should spend money for extensive lobbying to include different activities to promote professionalism. Through this, they can influence legislation on various matters, including health insurance, drug regulation, and managed care. An example of this, the American Academy of Dermatology has fought to maintain direct access to specialists because it is the most efficient and cost-effective method of providing quality dermatologic services^[8]. Therefore, professional services to be provided is driven by a broad professional vision of patient's welfare and not by a narrow self interest. Sixth, professional societies, medical schools, hospitals, departments in hospitals should adopt policies to minimize the influence of pharmaceutical and equipment companies and their representatives^[6]. If professional societies increased annual membership dues and registration fees for meetings, they would reduce their dependence on drug companies. In the same way, hospitals enforce some restrictions and adopt formal rules that prohibit all gifts, travel for doctors, sponsorship of lunches and conferences and should also make it clear that accepting these from drug company representatives violates the ethical norms of the profession. Finally, medical schools should enforce these same restrictions and adopt formal values that prohibit all gifts from drug companies to students, whether books, stethoscopes or meals.

In conclusion, we believe there is an essential rule for professionalism in society and a general call to be believed by all physicians how professionalism is to become more central to our thinking and behavior. The three elements of medical profession: devotion to service, profession of values and negotiations within society are the model for ideal normative guidance in medical practice. The greatest challenge to us is to provide the best possible care to those who are in the health care system and fulfill our obligation to society.

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