

Title: Responding to a precipitous decline in medical professionalism

Author: Venkatesh Doreswamy, M.B.B.S., M.D. (Physiology)

Context and setting: Professionalism is an essential foundation for medical education and ethical medical practice. In India, professionalism is predominantly learnt by observing positive and negative role models. Unfortunately, competition and greed have produced more negative role models, particularly concerning conflict of interest (COI), which undermines ethical practice and quality patient care. There is also growing patient dissatisfaction and increasing of litigations due to poor communication between physician and patient. The country's regulatory bodies monitoring quality of medical education do not have clear guidelines regarding training and assessing students' professionalism. Because there is no emphasis on professionalism, it is not taught in the majority of the institutions.

Why the idea or change was necessary: There is a significant influence of the pharmaceutical industry on medical practice. Both medical students and new graduates are exposed to a disturbing trend of conflict of interest which has shaken the foundation of ethical medical practice.

In order to sensitize students to the important ideas of professionalism, a professionalism module was introduced with two aims: 1) to reinforce the concepts of conflict of interest and 2) to train students in interpersonal communication skills.

What was done: First year students were given the opportunity to volunteer for this professionalism module. Eighty students volunteered and were given a pre-test to assess their knowledge of the concept of conflict of interest. A standardized patient assessed their interpersonal skills using a validated checklist.

The concepts of conflict of interest were introduced using case vignettes in six small group discussion sessions to all participating students. In addition, interpersonal skills training occurred over 6 sessions, using video presentation, and role plays. The students practiced skills on peers and standardized patients.

At the conclusion of the module, students were assessed on their knowledge and ability to analyze and apply the new knowledge using the same pretest questionnaire.

Interpersonal skills were assessed by standardized patients and a faculty *observer* using the same check list. The pre and post test scores for both knowledge and skills were expressed as mean \pm SD and comparison was done using a paired 't' test.

Evaluation of the results or impact: There was a statistically significant improvement ($p < 0.05$) in the understanding of conflict of interest and the practice of the majority of twenty interpersonal skills. However, there was only moderate improvement in the skills of documenting and verifying patients' response, explaining the process involved in the physical examination, checking patients' understanding and soliciting questions.

Students were active participants in the module and in response to a feedback questionnaire, expressed keen interest in the program because it was a different learning experience and made them confident in applying the principles of ethics. Further, they advocated making the study of professionalism compulsory and including it in formative assessment.

The faculty members, who had reservations about such training in first year, recognized the need and appreciated the perceptible change in the attitude of students. An unanticipated outcome was a positive change in the attitude of the faculty about introduction of professionalism module. Our goal is to sustain this heightened awareness and establish professionalism as a formal curriculum.

Venkatesh.D*, Medha Joshi**, and Shivaraj N.S*.

*M.S. Ramaiah Medical College, Bangalore, India.

** Bilcare Research Academy, Bangalore, India.