

By Professor Foo Keong Tatt

Professionalism in Medicine – My Perspective

Medicine is a profession. It is a noble profession. To some, medicine is more than a profession. It is a calling – a calling to do good to society with no self-interest. For this discussion, let us confine ourselves to the professional level: What is professionalism in medicine?

The words profession, professional, professionalism, come from the root word in latin “*professio*”, which means a public declaration with the force of a promise. The profession promises the public to deliver something to society. What is this promise?

The Boy Scouts, as a movement, promises to do their best, to do their duty to God and country, to help other people at all times and to obey the ten scout laws.

For our medical profession, what is our declared promise to the public? What is our commitment?

COMMITMENT

Our commitment to the public or society is, fundamentally, “to improve the care of our patients”.

“The secret of care for the patient is caring for the patient.” Francis Peabody in Boston stated this half a century ago.

We do not just treat but we care. We do not just care but we strive to improve on the care.

To treat, we need to be competent. To be competent, we need to keep up with the science of medicine, which is constantly changing.

Therefore we need to be committed to lifelong learning and attend continuous medical education programmes.

To care, we need to be compassionate. We need to not just sympathise but empathise with our patients and understand their anxiety and fears. We need to communicate and counsel, this is the art of medicine.

To improve on the care by the profession as a whole, just keeping up to date is not sufficient. To improve, we need to teach and to do research.

Thus there are three levels of commitment. Level one is to treat. It may be an acceptable standard if he is a non-professional. For a professional, just to treat is not sufficient, no matter how competent or excellent he may be. For a professional, he is expected to care for the patients as a whole, not just the body but the mind and spirit.

For any professional body or institution in medicine, the minimum commitment would be to improve on the care of the patients. That should be the bottomline of the hospital administrators, not just profit and loss. The institution’s mission should be to improve on the care of the patients, and not competing to be the best institution in Singapore or in the region.

As professionals in medicine, the public expects us, at the minimum, to care for our patients. Whatever we do is done in the best interests of the patients. Only then can we win the trust and respect of the patients. Only then



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will the patients believe in us. Believing and having trust in his doctor is an important part of the healing process.

Thus the profession as a whole would expect members to act accordingly, within the ethical codes. The profession will discipline those who fail to do so. The profession will self-regulate.

PROFESSIONAL SELF-REGULATION

The hallmark of a professional body is self-regulation. In Singapore, this is done through the Singapore Medical Council (SMC). The SMC derives its power through an act of Parliament, the people, the society. The society trusts the professional to be responsible, that this privilege of self-regulation is bestowed. The society expects the profession to admit only qualified members, maintain the standard of care, discipline its errant members, and have the power to dismiss the member.

Our profession should strive to retain this privilege of self-regulation and not let this be eroded through our neglect, with society going directly to the court of law to settle disputes and to discipline our members.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN A PROFESSIONAL AND A BUSINESSMAN

Apart from earning a living like any trade, a professional has an additional obligation to the public. This obligation is to give the best in the care of the patients.

We are obligated to give not just our best, but the best that is available. This is because our best may not be the best in certain circumstances. As a professional, we should know our own limitations. We should be humble enough to seek a second opinion for our patients, and refer him to the best expertise available if the situation warrants it – even when in doing so, we may lose the “custom” of the patients.

A businessman would advertise his trade, but a professional does not advertise. Advertisement or self-glorification is not good for the profession as it more often than not, misleads the public.

A doctor should earn the respect and trust of his other colleagues and patients by his professionalism, not by advertisement. “It is your colleagues who make you a specialist by referring patients to you,” said Professor Blandy, a well-known urologist from London, United Kingdom.

The referral is made in the best interests of the patients. The specialist is recognised for his expertise to care for the patient. Referrals should not be made on the basis of friendship or being given a part of the fee – a commission. That is

ethically unacceptable in a profession, though it is an acceptable and normal practice in a business. Blatant advertisement and fee-splitting is professional misconduct.

A professional will keep his patients’ secrets. A businessman will proudly advertise his clients to attract more customers. On the other hand, a businessman will keep his trade secrets, to avoid competition, whereas a professional is expected to share his knowledge with his colleagues and to publish his research so that all will benefit.

Whatever a businessman does is mainly for self-interest. That is ethically acceptable as long as he is honest. However, for a professional, apart from earning a living, he should be prepared for self-sacrifice. He should be prepared to forgo his time and conveniences for the sake of his patients. He needs to be altruistic, be prepared to help and counsel his patients without expecting any rewards. His rewards would be in the form of personal satisfaction and peace of mind and not in monetary or materialistic terms.

TEACHING THE NEXT GENERATION

The root word for doctor is “Docere” – a teacher. Thus our primary function as a doctor is not to dish out pills but to teach and counsel, not just our patients, but also the next generation of doctors.

Teaching the next generation is an important obligation of the professional. In the olden days, the medical profession was an apprenticeship. Even today, mentorship and role modelling are still important aspects of passing down the traditions of our noble profession to the next generations. The science of medicine can be acquired through e-learning, but the art of medicine needs to be nurtured in the clinics, with the seniors acting as mentors.

We need to teach the next generation to be better than ourselves, only then will there be improvement in the care of our patients.

CONCLUSION

What is professionalism in medicine?

Professionalism means our promise to society that we are committed to improve the care for our patients. To be competent in the delivery of this care, to have the best interest of our patient in mind, and to teach the next generation of our profession to be better than we are.

A professional in medicine would:

- Treat with competence,
- Care with compassion,
- Give patients the best and
- Teach the next generation. ■