

Are Faculty Members Prepared to Teach Professionalism?

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Introduction: The Accreditation Council of Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) now requires training programs to “define the specific knowledge, skills, behaviors, and attitudes required and provide educational experiences as needed to demonstrate professionalism, as manifested through a commitment to carrying out professional responsibilities, adherence to ethical principles, and sensitivity to a diverse patient population.” Are the teachers of professionalism prepared for this task? The purpose of this study was three-fold: 1) to assess perceptions of personal and departmental professionalism; 2) to determine threats faculty members perceive to their serving as role models for professional behavior; and 3) to define ways to improve professionalism.

Methods: A prospective faculty-wide survey was conducted in a single academic anesthesia department. Faculty members were asked the following questions: 1) How do you rate the departmental level of professionalism on a scale of 1-10 with 10 being the best? 2) What do you think needs to be done to improve the overall level of professionalism in the department? 3) How do you rate your personal level of professionalism on a scale of 1-10? 4) In what situations do you feel your personal professionalism is most challenged?

Results: Thirty-nine of 59 (64%) clinical faculty members participated. The average scores for personal professionalism and departmental professionalism were 8.6 (median 8, range 6-10) and 6.7 (median 7, range 1-9), respectively. Twenty-two gave the department lower score than they gave themselves, 15 gave themselves and the department the same score, and 2 gave the department higher scores than they gave themselves. The responses to question #4, “In what situations do you feel your professionalism is most challenged?” were easily divided into 3 categories: 1) lack of professionalism in others (N=17); 2) confrontations, particularly those threatening autonomy (N=17); and 3) time constraints (N=11). The answers to question #4, “What do you think needs to be done to improve the overall level of professionalism in the department?” suggested what leadership (departmental and institutional) should do (70%), and what the individual faculty member could do (30%).

Discussion: Teaching professionalism requires first, that the educators feel they are acting professionally, and that those around them are doing so as well. Faculty members clearly and strongly stated that they expected leadership to enforce a code of conduct with concrete evidence that unprofessional behavior will not be tolerated. Second, some faculty members desire training in conflict resolution to deal with confrontations with trainees, colleagues, nurses, surgeons, patients and their families, and administration. But learning to cope with confrontations in a professional manner was mentioned as not enough. They desire repair processes for systems that create circumstances that lead to confrontations. Finally, some faculty members expressed a desire for mentoring with regard to prioritizing and time management.