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2014 National Student DO of the Year**

Working within the bounds of a profession requires interaction with patients, colleagues, and non-healthcare professionals. As medical students, we are encouraged to always act in a professional manner. What is your definition of "professionalism"? What do you believe is required of a professional both within and outside a workplace setting in terms of appearance, leisure activities, and interactions with others? How do you encourage others to act professionally?

The gravity of one's responsibility is never more apparent than when his/her knowledge is rendered useless. Imagine having the solution to major problems, but with no one receptive to your ideas because of mistrust. For current and future physicians, this is an ongoing obstacle to overcome. Every medical student who has conducted an interview probably has a predetermined definition of professionalism, but what is the depth of that definition? Is professionalism merely being "nice" to others, making sure your shirt is tucked in, or your tie matches? The Commission on Osteopathic College Accreditation (COCA) and the American Osteopathic Association (AOA) believe professionalism is more than just appearance. It is viewed such a crucial component of becoming a competent physician, that it has been incorporated in the DO curriculum, not just the 4 years of medical school, but as a tested objective on national board exams. Per the Carnegie Report, the evaluations of professionalism are currently insufficient to address the issues facing physicians. This is because the definition goes deeper than appearance, but delves into the realms of cultural understanding, social interaction, and individual conduct. Such an important requirement deserves a more comprehensive definition. Professionalism must be defined as integration of knowledge with respect: respect for one's patients, peers, and self.

A physician-patient relationship is an intimate and sometimes fragile bond, an instance where the physician has the opportunity to understand someone literally from the inside out. For this relationship to be functional, it must be based on trust and respect. Two deeply intertwined qualities. If a physician comes to a patient looking unkempt, should that patient trust that she will maintain attention to detail? If a physician is charged with a DUI offense, could patients be sure he would not be reckless with their medical conditions? When patients see a physician act discourteously to ancillary staff, should they be confident that the physician will treat them with respect? All these are examples of situations that impact a patient's ability to trust their physician. Where there is no trust, there can be no progress. Physicians are not granted the convenience of "signing off." Being a physician is not a career, but a way of life. Who you are outside of the realm of medicine reflects on who you are professionally. When medical students cannot demonstrate this maturity, it suggests they are not prepared to manage patients.

Maintaining trust is imperative for our profession. An instance of a medical student cheating on an exam is a direct violation of ethics and morality. It demonstrates

disrespect for evaluation plus a lack of maturity, and puts future patients at risk. Medicine is not a “Rambo” movie. We depend on each other to provide care to our patients. If a medical student disrespects the profession, how can colleagues confidently refer patients to that person? When attending conferences where you represent the profession, one cannot be overindulgent out of respect for peers. This does not mean having no fun, but rather being responsible and maintaining a level of maturity that preserves the trust upon which profession relies.

Self-care is also crucial, both for longevity and as an example to patients. If a physician counsels a diabetic patient about their diet and exercise regimens, it is harder to get compliance if the physician is himself at risk. Social media is a new effective means of communication which can be a blessing or a curse. A medical student posting Facebook pictures of a cadaver dissection, a surgical procedure, or a “drunken adventure,” (however entertaining), is a violation of both trust and the self-respect demanded of a physician. At the least, privacy settings should be modified to insure personal pictures are not available in a public forum.

In many ways, physicians are at the public’s mercy. We need the trust of our patients to improve their quality of life, and that requires respect. To borrow from Osteopathic philosophy, this respect must be demonstrated in every interaction. This in no way suggests having physicians who are devoid of personality, but ones that are engrained in respect and understanding of others. The most effective way to promote this idea is to be the example. If you ever question what professionalism is or how it applies, ask yourself what the most respectful way to approach the situation is. We are the advocates of quality of life. Our goal is to promote health in every instance. It is our duty to treat this responsibility with the respect and trust that it deserves.