

NURTURING PROFESSIONALISM IN CURRENT HEALTH PROFESSIONS EDUCATION

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Maradona's 'goal of the century' during FIFA World Cup 1986 evokes a spark in our minds. The spark of 'competence versus professionalism'. Many have debated about the infamous goal of 'Hand of God'. Some argued that everything is fair in a game. Some reasoned that Maradona should have declared it as a 'handball' himself because he had already realized his fault, as reports mentioned; 'Maradona nervously began to celebrate, glancing sideways at the referee and the linesman, and relaxed when the goal was validated...'

The concept of professionalism is rather caught than taught. Plato's Meno initiated with an outrageous question to Socrates as "Can you tell me, Socrates, is human excellence something teachable? Or, if not teachable, is it something to be acquired by training? Or, if it cannot be acquired either by training or by teaching, does it accrue to me at birth or in some other way?" To this series of questions Socrates responded, 'If we could find teachers of 'human excellence', or virtue, we might be able to teach it, but, as we cannot find teachers, virtue cannot be taught.' If this could not be answered in the 5th Century BC, then, it being solved in the present complex academic environment is less likely. Professionalism in current health professions education, may be defined as a group of attitudes, values, behaviour and interactions that act as the basis of the health professional's contract with society. The students have responsibility towards the society and are expected to have good standard of professional behavior. The question is, how much space do these essential skills, find in our existing curriculum?

Human nature is fundamentally selfish. We are generally motivated by our own welfare. However, there are people who help others selflessly. I recall one of my students, talking to an old man in a corridor of our hospital. The student was offering Rs 500 to this old man. Seeing my inquisitive eyes, the student replied 'Madam, this old man has no money to go home as all his money was used up in laboratory tests at the hospital'. This touched my heart and I offered to help this old man on his behalf. The student had offered to help, not

because he did not need the money for himself but because he realized the old man needed it more than him. Altruism is the first desirable attribute of professionalism. We need more altruistic people in our line of work. The selection criteria for intake of health science students, need to be designed in a way where compassion, humility and caring attitude can be tested, to bring the right people in the profession. Students have been practicing altruism through volunteering in different societies, clubs and committees, an environment created for them. However, vigilant monitoring is required before greed for material gains, creeps-in to their minds.

Being accountable is central to our profession. It includes taking responsibility for ones' action, always ensuring one is competent to do the activity given to him/her and always putting patients' interest first. It is about, knowing why you're doing it, being properly trained and assessed as being competent to do it and doing treatment as agreed plan of care for patients. Accountability also means complying with the code of conduct that applies to health care professionals in the country. Reflection question here is, how accountable are we in our profession?

'Human excellence' is fundamentally a matter of character. Here, two types of virtues are in question. Once character has been formed, "intellectual virtue" can be expected. Sound character is "moral virtue" and it is primarily a matter of conditioning. Moral virtue is learned by repetition; intellectual virtue can be taught and is the appropriate concern of the health professions education institutions like ours. Moral virtue should be acquired at a very early age. Plato had failed to educate Dion's son in Syracuse inspite of repeated attempts because the young man was already vain, undisciplined and self-absorbed by the time Plato started to work with him. Hence, professionalism attributes are to be taught early in the program. Incorporation of professionalism module in all health professions education courses, is a must at an early formative years of the program.

At times we as doctors realize the mistake on prescription



writing. Do we have the courage to confront and apologize to the patient? Integrity may be defined as a virtue consisting of soundness of and adherence to moral principles and character and standing up in their defense when they are threatened or under attack. This involves consistent, habitual honesty and a coherent integration of reasonably stable, justifiable moral values, with consistent judgment and action over time. In health professions setting, integrity can be defined as encompassing honesty, keeping one's word, and consistently adhering to principles of professionalism, even when it is not easy to do so. Doctor's integrity forms a foundation for patients' trust and fosters healthy therapeutic relationships that promote healing. Integrity and accountability form the basis of the "social contract" between physicians and society, which grants professionals the privilege of self-regulation¹.

Respect for others, practicing empathy and being trustworthy are other important attributes of professionalism which may find a place in subsequent issues of this journal.

Role of educators as role models to learn professionalism should be emphasized in our context. A role model teaches primarily by example and helps to shape professional identity and commitment through promoting observation and comparison. Educators/educational leaders need to work on professionalism ourselves, to ensure we impart this essential

competency to our students. Individuals and organizational heads/educational leaders are responsible for preventing an erosion of professional standards and for regulating the culture of health care professionals. Healthy organizations demonstrate their commitment to professionalism, proactively and non-judgmentally, by learning from reports of wrong doing and mechanisms to prevent them from recurring. Those in leadership positions must acknowledge that role models may be negative as well as positive. If faculty development and personal counseling do not alter the conduct of those perceived to be negative role models, then privilege should be withdrawn, other duties assigned, and institutional support reconfigured.

To conclude, professionalism is one of the essential competencies for health professional experts along with being a scholar, collaborator, health advocate, communicator, manager as defined by accreditation bodies across the world. The attributes of professionalism discussed above, are to be practiced and adopted in daily life. Coming back to the introductory paragraph of Maradona's infamous goal, nobody doubted the competency of this iconic player, however, his professionalism was severely questioned. Let us contemplate on 'competence versus professionalism' at this juncture of academic innovation.

