

AN APPROACH TO EVALUATING PROFESSIONALISM IN HEALTH PROFESSIONS EDUCATION

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Abstract: The higher education system lays a great deal of emphasis on attainment of knowledge and skills, but professional skills have not been emphasized and are rarely included in the assessment process. This study was aimed at evaluating if the use of multiple modalities of reflective assessment will help to provide an insight into the professional attitudes of students in health professions education.

Method: Professional attitudes of 56 medical and 78 pharmaceutical students were evaluated using checklists and scenario interpretation.

Result: It was seen that 92.16% of medical students and 91.67% of pharmacy students adopted health profession due to compassion for humanity. 95.24% of medical students and 92.86% of pharmacy students rated knowledge, clinical skills, attitude, communication skills and professionalism as highly important for success. 92.84% and 85.71% knew basics of professionalism.

Conclusion: Professional attitudes can be measured by using surveys and scenario evaluation in the early phase of health professions education. There is a high standard of professional values among the newly admitted students in the two colleges studied.

Keywords: professionalism, attitudes, student assessment

INTRODUCTION

Until the last few years, there was a differential emphasis on knowledge and skills rather than attitudinal skills in higher education. The inherent belief that professionalism is caught and not taught has led to deterioration of values and behavior. This has been detrimental to the society's perception of professionals whether they are in the business, engineering, legal or medical sector.

Most institutions of higher education have reported that secondary education has to be overhauled to incorporate social skills so that they will be able to achieve sufficient employability skills during higher education. Many universities have included this in general education as Accreditation bodies have recognized the need for it. However, there is still a lack of emphasis on these issues which has created a gap in imparting professional behaviours and measuring performance.

It might seem tough to measure the subjective attributes that constitute desired professionalism and attitudes, but emphasis on these skills and values have to be factored into the assessment plan to ascertain the effectiveness of any program. This is more so in the case of health professions education and this was the reason for this study.

BACKGROUND

Dubai Medical College and Dubai Pharmacy College have been every proactive in creating an environment which fosters high levels of knowledge and skills. While most universities rely heavily on acquisition of hard knowledge and career skills, recently most colleges have shifted their focus towards professionalism and communication skills.

At DMC and DPC, the students have low level of exposure to the sufferings of the poor and needy, creating a need for improving attitudes towards the destitute. Despite the desire to alleviate suffering, they have low tolerance for their own discomfort. They are unaware of the fact that it is the struggle and sacrifice involved that imparts such a high degree of nobility to health profession.

Their perception of their professional life is based on their limited experience, therefore when faced with difficult real life situations like stubborn colleagues or non-cooperative personalities, they have difficulties in coping with the situation.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Studies have shown that freshmen join universities with very ambitious ideals. But later, the need for long hours of hard work to master the knowledge and skills makes them depressed.

A study in 2013 has reported that it is critically important for practicing physicians to understand professionalism in the context of the community. The researchers concluded that opportunities should be provided to reflect on professional behavior in a non-threatening and open forum to motivate physicians to

assess themselves on their professional behavior at work. (Bernabeo, Holmboe, Ross, Chesluk, & Ginsburg, 2013)

Use of multiple methods may be the most valid mechanism for assessing professionalism as reported by some scholars. The validity of assessment of professionalism through Michael Kane's approach to validity have been described. (Clauser, Margolis, Holtman, Katsuftrakis, & Hawkins, 2012) In an earlier paper, Holtman states that social networks drives the professional norms so that social reaction becomes the central element of professional conduct. Therefore, accounting of the social reaction to professional conduct of an individual is required to make a valid assessment of professionalism. (Holtman, 2008)

In community colleges, it has been proved that it is imperative to teach them to construct knowledge through reflective exercises from environment, experience and leadership. (Sullivan & Wiessner, 2010).

Rather than using a written examination, oral evaluation or scenario interpretation and feedback are seen to be powerful tools for assessment. (Huxham, Campbell, & Westwood, 2012) In the engineering field, it has been reported that a challenging scenario for examinations are expected to create broader learning from focused assessments. (Rossiter, 2013) These studies can be interpreted to point out that multiple modalities are required for a valid student assessment process.

It has been proved by empirical studies that learning from their peers have made an impact in their professional behavior. Constructive feedback from peer assessment has led to improved work habits and interpersonal skills in students of anatomy. (Spandorfer et al., 2014)

AIM OF STUDY

This study was aimed at evaluating if the use of multiple modalities of reflective assessment will help to provide an insight into the professional attitudes of students in health professions education. This study also helps in evaluating the actual level of professional beliefs among students of health professions education.

METHOD OF STUDY

The study involved evaluation of the scoring pattern of first year medical and pharmacy students in reaction to the day to day encounters in real life. Their perception of ideal behavior in a social context has been evaluated through 3 sessions at intervals of 1 to 2 weeks.

The study included the population of students who were admitted to the colleges every year. The sample was the first year students of the batches admitted in 2012 in both colleges. The perceptions and beliefs of 56 medical and 78 pharmaceutical students of first year were evaluated using checklists and scenario evaluation.

The response rates have been shown in Table 1 given below.

Table 1 Response rates from both colleges

Response rate From DMC

No of responses	Total Sample	Percentage response
Session 1 51	56	91.07
Session 2 42	56	75.00
Session 3 42	56	75.00

Response rate from DPC

No of responses	Total Sample	Percentage response
Session 1 72	78	92.31
Session 2 70	78	89.74
Session 3 70	78	89.74

Details of the Three Sessions

The first session was done by an anonymous questionnaire on reasons of choosing health professions education. Students were asked to write a note on why they chose the health profession.

The second part of the study was done to evaluate and sensitize the students to the qualities required by health professionals. The students were required to rate the list of qualities provided among highly important-3, moderately important-2 and less important-1. This list was prepared from a reflective exercise on preferred qualities of health professionals. The percentage of students who rated each quality were now compared between the two groups.

In the third session, the students were asked to respond to questions related to multiple scenarios to assess if the students knew about professionalism and empathy as a concept. The scenarios were related to their emotions felt during the early classes in the Anatomy lab, how they thought a teacher should react to students with poor attitudes and how they would manage conflicts among colleagues in the hostel. It was clear that the students had gained an understanding about the importance of empathy.

The scenarios were related to

- Their emotions felt during the early classes in the Anatomy lab
- How they thought a teacher should react to students with poor attitudes

c. How they would manage conflicts among colleagues in the hostel.

RESULTS

The results obtained have been provided separately for each session and then later summarized.

Session 1

92.2% of medical students and 91.6% of pharmacy students adopted health profession due to compassion for humanity.

Table 3 A sample of the tabulation of student response from Session 1

What do you expect to achieve by being a health professional? (in their own words)	No. of students
cure people, reduce pain	7
help poor and needy	5
community, Public Health	2
save people's lives	2
research, discover new treatment	2
Be successful	1
self satisfaction	1
Make my own hospital	1
awareness	1
my own country	1
Happiness, role model	1

Session 2

95.2% of medical students and 92.8% of pharmacy students rated knowledge, clinical skills, attitude, communication skills and professionalism as highly important for success. The results are tabulated in the figures 1 and 2 below:

Session 3

92.8% and 85.7% of students knew basics of professionalism and empathy from DMC and DPC respectively.

Comparison of Overall Results of Both Colleges

It was seen that 92.16% of medical students and 91.67% of pharmacy students adopted health profession due to compassion for humanity. 95.24% of medical students and 92.86% of pharmacy students rated knowledge, clinical skills, attitude, communication skills and professionalism as highly important for success. 92.84% and 85.71% knew basics of professionalism and empathy respectively as shown in Table 3 and Fig 3.

Table 3 Comparison of overall results of DMC and DPC

	DMC	DPC					
% students with desired response	No of students with desired response	No of students with desired response	Total responses	%			
students with desired response			Total responses				
Session 1	92.16	47	51	91.67	66	72	
Session 2	95.24	40	42	92.86	65	70	
Session 3	92.84	39	42	85.71	60	70	

DISCUSSION

Way back in 2006, Sethuraman stated that a professional is a person who belongs to a profession which possesses specialized knowledge, skills and attitudes which have been obtained after a long period of study and which are used to benefit other members of society. The term professionalism is used to describe those skills, attitudes and behaviors which we have come to expect from individuals during the practice of their profession and includes concepts such as maintenance of competence, ethical behavior, integrity, honesty, altruism, service to others, adherence to professional codes, justice, respect for others, self-regulation, etc. A professional is a person who belongs to a profession which possesses specialized knowledge, skills and attitudes which have been obtained after a long period of study and which are used to benefit other members of society. (Sethuraman, 2006)

The desirable attributes of health professionals as perceived by society are competence, ethical behavior, integrity, honesty, altruism, service to others, adherence to professional codes, justice, respect for others, self-regulation, etc.

Arnold and Stern defined medical professionalism in the context of expected skills and attributes as stated below:

“Professionalism is demonstrated through the foundation of clinical competence, communication skills, and ethical and legal understanding, upon which is built the aspiration to and wise application of the principles of professionalism: excellence, humanism, accountability and altruism.” (Arnold & Stern, 2006)

An earlier study on assessment of professionalism has been conducted on first year medical students using multiple modalities, however the validity was confined to medical students. (Shersad, 2012). Expanding this to other health professions students has shown valid and reliable results, proving that the same could be applicable to other professions as well.

Discussion with self-reflection following assessment using examples of day-to-day behavior of students like absence and disturbing lectures due to mobile phones help them share ideas with their peers. It is clear that the priority for professionalism should be introduced into the students' minds early in the course as their enthusiasm is very high immediately after joining the course. Since assessment drives learning, such in-course assessment modalities will help instill values at this stage.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that professional attitudes can be measured by using relevant surveys and scenario evaluation in the early phase of health professions education. Students are motivated to reflect and respond honestly as it is a low risk assessment. Continuous, multiple in-course assessment leads to sensitization to professional behaviour.

Both the groups of students show a high level of professional aptitude. There are no significant differences observed between the students of the two colleges. While indicating the validity of the assessment method, it could reflect the high standard of professional values among the newly admitted students in the two colleges studied.

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