

Professionalism Overview

Background

The impetus for an increased focus on professionalism as a core value by medical organizations is rooted in many concerns. The American Board of Internal Medicine (ABIM) Foundation, the organization that has exhibited the most public leadership on this topic and published extensively on the subject, has identified a multiplicity of stressors that can affect professional behavior by physicians. Causative factors that are believed to exacerbate a lack of professionalism include the sweeping changes and uncertainty in health care in recent years, the unionization of residents and practicing physicians, and conflicts of interest due to managed care and for-profit medicine, to name a few. The ABIM has collaborated with its European counterpart, the European Federation of Internal Medicine, along with the American College of Physicians-American Society of Internal Medicine (ACP-ASIM) Foundation to develop a Physician Charter on Professionalism in order to raise the concept as an international priority for these organizations and their constituents. The Charter will be published in leading medical journals along with a series of educational efforts throughout 2002 and 2003 to raise awareness and commitment to the core values associated with physician professionalism.

Similar efforts are underway in medical academics; the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) has identified six generic competencies that must be included in all accredited residency training programs effective July 2002. The competencies include patient care, medical knowledge, practice-based learning and improvement, professionalism, interpersonal and communication skills, and systems-based practice. The components of the professionalism competency address a myriad of issues from basic etiquette, grooming, and interpersonal communications, to ethical considerations and service to society. It is the express intent of the ACGME that residency training programs demonstrate the achievement of the core competencies through educational based outcomes.

The nursing literature has historically focused on the competencies of communication and interdisciplinary based patient care as a crucial factor in achieving patient outcomes. The American Nurses Association Code of Conduct defines behavioral expectations for professional nurses. Recent nursing literature has also identified strained nurse-physician relations as a critical issue for nurses practicing in acute care settings. Self reports from nurses suggest that inappropriate physician behavior is commonplace, and routinely tolerated by hospitals.

Approach

This project aims to provide suggested approaches for increasing the level of professionalism within institutions. The medical and nursing literature suggest that this is

a vital issue that must be addressed in order to preserve and grow the integrity of both professional groups. In fact, disrespectful treatment by physicians is often cited as a major dissatisfier for nurses. As the gap grows between supply and demand for nursing it is essential to address the core issues that are negatively affecting hospital based nursing practice.

While it is impossible to provide a prescribed approach for improving the professional climate in a given organization, this project team has developed a “toolkit” for hospitals to utilize. It is critical that an organization select strategies that align senior leadership of the hospital with senior medical leadership in order to be effective. This priority must then be translated into actionable items throughout the organization.

As the model (figure 1) below depicts, the foundation for enhancing professionalism is provided by the various professional group’s established standards and codes of behavior. The hospital or practice setting is then able to import such codified standards into formal organizational expectations. The initial internal strategy is aimed at securing board level support for the initiative. Board level action provides a definitive position for the organization on the issue. The position in this issue is then transferred throughout the infrastructure, allowing elements of professionalism to be woven into existing policies, procedures, competencies, and educational programs. The next level in the model addresses individual competencies, some of which may be addressed via the above mentioned elements. The highest level of competency is the individual’s ability to perform as an effective team member, which is represented by the apex of the triangle. Although some professionals have a positive relationship with patients and families, there may be a significant gap in the quality of their relationships with other members of the clinical team.

The toolkit includes the following elements for use at various levels of the organization:

- Board Resolution on Professionalism
- Professional Organization’s Position Statements on Professionalism
- Proposed Approaches to Increase Personal Professionalism
- Team Based Approach to Building Professionalism
- Supporting Research and Measurement Tools

Figure 1: Professionalism Model

