



Teaching Professionalism and Ethics at Health Care Institutions: Why and How?

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Being a Health care Professional brings about a dual responsibility on the shoulders of an individual. It is not only about acquiring a set of clinical competencies, but also about developing a compassionate and understanding approach towards patients, peers and one's self. Developing soft skills during the training of a health care professional is as important as developing other professional skills to ensure his or her success as a Doctor. However, despite of its well-established importance, training in Professionalism and ethics has found little importance in Dentistry, Medicine or any other healthcare courses.

To underline the importance of ethics and professionalism, it is indeed necessary to define what "ethical and professional" behavior means. Ethics are basically defined as the 'moral principles that govern a person's behaviour or the conducting of an activity'. American Dental Association has based its Principles of Ethics and Code of Professional Conduct on five fundamentals:

1. Patient autonomy
2. Non-maleficance
3. Beneficence
4. Justice
5. Veracity

According to Masella; altruism, integrity, carefulness, communitarianism, and the commitment with excellence are core attributes in dental professionalism. These attributes can very well be applied to other health care professions too.

Exposing the students early to the concepts of professionalism and ethics during their training will help in building the right attitude in them which will in turn facilitate their holistic development as a health care professional. Despite of many proposal, there is no or minimal inclusion of training in these skills in the present curricula. The institutes may consider introducing specific training modules for students after thorough need assessment. However, the greatest way to teach the students these life skills is by presenting the appropriate role models in front of them. The teaching and non-teaching staff members must follow the code of professional and ethical conduct stringently. The institutional management must try to develop policies which are conducive for establishing an ethical and professional culture within the institute. A formal code of professional and ethical conduct must be in place within the institution. The exact nature and perception of these values and behaviours will vary from person to person, however the core principles must include:

1. Maintenance of professional appearance and behaviour
2. Developing communication skills
3. Having an empathetic approach towards patients and peers
4. Adherence to core moral values of honesty and compassion
5. An overall a drive to excel as a health care professional in a true sense

Few of these qualities are difficult or in fact impossible to be trained in but have to be inculcated within one's moral frame work. However, it is easier said than done. Appreciating and acknowledging the individuals with the above approach may motivate others to follow the same path and hence must be done within the institutions on day to day basis. This could be done by a step as simple as highlighting such ethical and professional behaviour in Institutional journal/magazine or even notice board. Incentives for inculcating ethical and professional behaviour like a yearly award could also be introduced for teaching as well as auxiliary staff and students.

It is high time that health care education shall be made more value-based and this calls for developing newer, out of the box ideas for implementation of the same from the health educators. This is not only necessary for the development of professionals at personal level, but for the benefit of the society at large [1,2].

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