Role Models of Professionalism: Who they are, what they think and how they influence medical students

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Background

Transitioning from a medical student to a doctor requires not only the requisite scientific knowledge and clinical skills, but also the desired values, attitudes and professional character. Role modeling is a key modality through which this is learned. How role models are perceived by their students and the attributes which they imbue in their teaching have been described in final year medical students but the relationship between these and the views and intentions of role models themselves has not been explored. The aim of this study is to explore how student-identified role models conceptualize their own professionalism and how it compares with the perceptions of their students.

Methods

This was a mixed method study which used both quantitative and qualitative methods.

(1) Questionnaire survey

All third (n=160) and final (n=120) year medical students at HKU UKS Faculty of Medicine in the academic year of 2012–2013 were invited to join the study. Participants completed a questionnaire which asked them to identify a teacher whom they considered to be a role model of professionalism and how the teacher was a role model, and indicated how the teacher has affected their values, attitudes, behavior, or character. Questionnaire responses were analyzed with descriptive statistics, and open-text content was analyzed thematically.

(2) Individual interviews

The 5 most frequently cited teachers in the initial student questionnaire survey and 9 other cited teachers, purposely selected to maximize diversity of opinion, participated in individual semi-structured interviews from Feb-May 2013. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were independently coded by 2 researchers, and differences were resolved by consensus. Interviews continued until there was saturation of themes.

Results

118 students (64% male) participated in the questionnaire survey, with a response rate of 39% (31% in Year 3; 69% in Year 5). From the questionnaire survey, over 50 teachers were identified as role models of professionalism. 14 teachers were interviewed. Characteristics of professionalism described by both students and teachers were categorized into 3 domains: (1) Teacher-related (interaction with students); (2) Physican-related (interaction with patients and colleagues, medical knowledge); and (3) Person-related (personal attributes). Within these domains, some key differences surfaced with students describing that teachers’ professional impact was felt through their strictness, their personal sharing, and their interaction with colleagues but not necessarily through their friendliness.

Physician-related

- Doctor-patient relationship, clinical interpersonal skills
  - They sometimes appreciated that “the way I communicated with the patient,” that when I sort of took them to the bedside teaching, “I’ve been quite and considerate and sort of gentle in the patients.” (Teacher 1)
  - “I demonstrated incredible patience and an eye to detail, really explained everything to the patient to keep him informed and was careful to prevent unnecessary discomfort” (Teacher 14)

- Clinical competence and expertise
  - “When I’m seeing new patient they might like the way that I derive correct diagnosis quite rapidly... that may be part of the clinical skill.” (Teacher 6)
  - “Interpersonal skill, in knowledge, efficient thinking skills and perseverance” (Teacher 16)

Person-related

- Enthusiasm in teaching and practice
  - “Personally there is one point real that I’m doing my job here still at this age and stage of my life, because I find medicine interesting... I enjoy it and I think that my students probably can feel that enthusiasm” (Teacher 6)
  - “Enthusiastic about teaching and medicine” (Teacher 16)

- Interaction with colleagues
  - “I took the effort and time to discuss with the patient the possible management plan, and he negotiated with other doctors for giving novel treatments” (Teacher 11)
  - “We... have good relationship with other staff like nurses” (Teacher 11)

Discussion

Findings of our study were similar to past studies done in Western countries on house staff who identified such attributes as adding dedicated time in teaching, addressing importance of doctor-patient relationship, and enthusiasm in teaching. Discrepancy appeared mostly on the expectation of the students about the role of a medical teacher. While teachers are expected to be friendly and approachable in Western countries, students in our study were more critical of their personalities due to Confucian belief, and hence had no expectation for them to be friendly and even appreciated them for being strict.

Conclusion

Teachers are perceived as role models of professionalism in their capacity as a teacher, a physician, or a person. There are differences between teachers and students in the perception of some attributes within a role due to cultural considerations. Nonetheless, role modeling is reaffirmed as a powerful tool in shaping student perception of professionalism. Teachers can be made aware of the extent of their influence in order to facilitate role modeling behavior.

References