Medical Students’ Conception of Professionalism: The Impact of an Early Family Doctor Attachment

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Introduction
The goal of undergraduate medical education is to nurture the development of doctors with the professional attributes required for quality patient care. A systematic review shows that early clinical contact helps students develop a professional identity. Also, early patient interaction with clinician-led small groups results in broader, more complex understanding of professionalism. Family Medicine has strong sociologic and humanistic focus with volume and diversity of patients which helps develop respect and understanding. Therefore, "Becoming a Doctor: Professionalism in Practice" (PiP), a 3-year longitudinal programme, was first launched in September 2012 for medical students in the new undergraduate curriculum in a university in Hong Kong, where they attach to a community family doctor in the first three years of study. The aim of this study was to investigate medical students' conception of professionalism after the first year of PiP programme.

Professionalism in Practice Programme (PiP)
- Aim to facilitate positive professional attitudes and behaviours and to encourage students to explore their own ideas of professionalism
- Longitudinal, anchored by attachment to the same family doctor over 3 years, supported by small group discussion, workshop, and reflective writing
- Provide experiential learning in family practice setting, role modeling, and feedback from tutors

Methods
This qualitative study was carried out from October 2012 to October 2013. All 210 Year 1 MBBS students at the LKS Faculty of Medicine, HKU, were invited to participate. Qualitative data was obtained from (1) written questionnaire survey, (2) student written assignments including a reflective writing on professionalism in the family doctor attachment and a personal oath about the tenets of professionalism, and (3) focus group interviews. Thematic analysis was done individually by investigators on transcribed data to identify and categorize emerged themes. The investigators met to carry out further refinement of themes with differences resolved by consensus.

Results
Professionalism was conceptualized in 3 main ways: (1) Personal attributes, (2) Characteristics of family practice, and (3) Self-care. Most frequent themes with quotes identified are as follows:

- **Personal attributes**
  - "I will respect all people who have taught valuable medical knowledge to me. I will treat them not only as teachers to my knowledge, but also teachers to my life. I will respect all patients I meet in hospitals and clinics. I will respect all my classmates. I will respect myself as a medical student."

- **Characteristics of family practice**
  - "I promise to be committed, because I know that once I uptake the role of being a medical student, it signifies something beyond, that I am entering a medical path hopefully as my life-long profession that I hold not only responsible to myself, but also to society which has spent resources in nurturing me as who I am."

- **Self-care**
  - "I will maintain a healthy and balanced life style. I will take care of my own health and not an example to other people."

Discussion
Students' conception of professionalism showed some consistency with other proposed conceptual frameworks. The result also showed that students had considered the nature of family practice and doctor-patient relationship as professionalism.

Conclusion
Early attachment to family doctors is beneficial to students to help them begin to develop a personal conception of professionalism. Family doctors are in a powerful position to influence students' attitudes towards family medicine, patient care, and what it means to be a doctor. With the promising first year experience, students can revisit and reflect on changes in attitudes and perceptions of professionalism in subsequent years of the PiP.

References
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