

Are you a professional?

In the new standards published in *Tomorrow's Doctors* (2009), professionalism is placed high on the list of attributes required of doctors. But what do we mean by the term 'professionalism', and how can it be applied both in medical school and in practice? We put these questions to students, patients and doctors.

Mr Nicholas Deakin, CoChairman, BMA Medical Students Committee and 3rd Year Medical Student

Students need to experience professionalism early in their education. As students, it is our job to learn and work towards achieving and upholding the professional values expected of us on qualification, which affects how we approach our learning, patients and colleagues.

Clinical medical practice, and shadowing doctors in healthcare settings as we progress through the course, makes moving from student doctor to doctor much easier. It's important that we, as students, have positive role models – we all remember inspirational doctors – this helps us to develop good practice which we can use as a foundation for the rest of our careers.

Adrian Raby, Clinical lecturer and General Practitioner

Professionalism is hard to define, yet easier to spot when it is absent! It is about the way we conduct ourselves on a number of levels both when at work and outside the workplace. It is about communicating effectively with both patients and colleagues, being responsive to patient needs, being aware of our own limitations, keeping up to date, and acting honestly and with integrity. It also involves being reflective and critical of our own clinical practice and values, and the practice of colleagues, and where necessary taking steps to address deficiencies.

In the medical school where I lecture, we are keen to ensure that professionalism is not just taught but also assessed. This way, students who are naturally focused on passing assessments are aware of the importance of professionalism in their future clinical practice.

Mitesh Naik, 3rd year medical student

For some people it's common sense, but it varies. Using colloquial phrases in a consultation could be misconstrued as improper conduct. It does help a lot if you give off the impression of being someone who is both approachable and does know what they're talking about and understands the underlying principles of medicine.

Claire Eatock, Lay member of the GMC's reference community

For me, professionalism is really important. It makes such a difference to know (or assume) that your problem is important and will be treated with confidence and integrity.

A large part of going to see my doctor is the relief that someone will listen to you, treat you with respect and help sort out the problem quickly, efficiently and safely. The whole persona of a smart, competent and caring person makes a big difference mentally as well as physically, particularly if you're feeling under the weather.

Perhaps it would help students to ask themselves how they would like to be treated and cared for. If the focus is kept on this and the patient's needs it should help.

**Chris Fowler,
QABME visitor and professor of surgical education**

Being open and honest is sometimes uncomfortable because it can expose our inability to deliver clear and definite answers, potentially damaging the belief that the patient has in the doctor as an expert practitioner. This is where I feel supported by professionalism, which is a key element in an environment where patients are generally confident that doctors can be trusted to do the right thing for the right reasons. I might not be able to give them all they hope for but they respect me for trying!

**Professor Janice Rymer,
QABME visitor and Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology**

Professionalism includes being reliable, punctual, respectful, competent and good at communicating. To provide effective medical treatment, professionalism is extremely important so that patients have confidence in you to accept what you say and comply with treatment. They must also be able to feel comfortable to be able to ask any questions. Also, being well groomed is important and never losing control no matter how much stress you are under.

We spend more time now on professionalism and emphasise these values throughout our courses. I am known for not tolerating lateness as I think it is so disrespectful to colleagues and patients. Hopefully students are exposed to professionalism in theory and in practice by role modelling – hence my annoyance when colleagues are late as it gives a very poor image of how a doctor should behave.

We also spend more time on communication skills and hopefully identify the students who are not so good at communicating and spend more time with them through the use of role-playing.

**Niroshini Rajaretnam,
5th year medical student**

The curriculum isn't there just to teach us how to pass exams, but they always emphasise that you need these skills to become a good doctor so that you can communicate with your patients and your peers.

In medicine, we've gone through most of our lives in a very scientific environment, and so we've adopted a scientific vocabulary and style for ourselves. But, especially in dealing with patients, the training teaches us to drop the jargon and get back to basics so we can communicate with someone on their level.