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## Introduction

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## Issues in Medical Ethics: 2000

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THE CONCEPT OF “PROFESSIONALISM,” with its focus on the character as well as the behavior of physicians, has received increasing attention in medicine and in medical ethics. Physicians are turning to the concept of the “profession” as a potential institutional counterweight to the growing role of commercial, for-profit organizations within health care and the shifting priorities and regulations of government. In the 1990s, mention and discussion of professionalism snowballed into 655 journal articles. An additional 267 articles on the subject have appeared in just the past 20 months, including entire journal issues devoted to the subject and reports by professional associations (1–3).

This increasing attention to professionalism and the variety of ways that the concept is being used, sparked our concern about how well the concept was understood and how widely that understanding was shared. Because medical educators were beginning to address the importance of professionalism in medical education, it was obvious that they would need a clear grasp of the concept to guide their curricula and educational programs. To that end, we dedicated our fifteenth annual ethics conference to “Understanding Professionalism and Its Implications for Medical Education.” It was held at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City on November 3, 2000. The speakers and panelists included physicians, sociologists, historians, philosophers, lawyers, educators, a medical student, and a medical resident. The participants were Bernard H. Baumrin, Ph.D., J.D., *professor of philosophy, the Graduate School, CUNY, adjunct professor of medical education, Mount Sinai School of Medicine*; Alex Stagnaro-Green, M.D., *dean for student affairs and medical education, Mount Sinai School of Medicine*; Rosemary Stevens, Ph.D., *professor, history and sociology of science, University of Pennsylvania*; Thomas Rüten, P.D., Dr., *Institut für Theorie und Geschichte der Medizin, University of Münster, Germany*; Steven R. Latham, J.D., Ph.D., *director, Center for Health Law and Policy, Quinnipiac College School of Law*; Haavi E. Morreim Ph.D., *professor, medical ethics, University of Tennessee College of Medicine*; Edmund D. Pellegrino, M.D., *John Carroll professor of medicine and medical ethics, Center for Clinical Bioethics, Georgetown University Medical Center*; Daniel A. Moros, M.D., *associate professor of neurology, Mount Sinai School of Medicine*; Fred Hafferty, Ph.D., *professor of behavioral sciences, University of Duluth School of Medicine*; Samuel Bloom, Ph.D., *professor of community and preventive medicine, Mount Sinai School of Medicine*; Mark Siegler, M.D., *Lindy Bergman distinguished service professor of medicine and director, MacLean Center for Clinical Medical Ethics, University of Chicago*; David M. Nierman, M.D., *clinical associate professor of medicine and director, Medical Intensive Care Unit, Mount Sinai School of Medicine*; Roger Cornwall, M.D., *PGY IV, Department of Orthopaedics, Mount Sinai School of Medicine*; Jennifer Fehser, *fourth-year student, Mount Sinai School of Medicine*; and Arthur Rubenstein, M.B.B.Ch., *dean, Mount Sinai School of Medicine*.

The historical and sociological presentations by Rosemary Stevens, Thomas Rüten, and Steven Latham made it

clear that, regardless of the personal reasons one has for choosing to become a doctor, making that choice essentially involves undertaking specific moral responsibilities. Medicine is seen as a profession and its unique professional commitments have been recognized, accepted, and endorsed throughout its history. Societies have acknowledged medicine's special expertise, authorized its special powers and privileges, and relied upon its special obligations to be concerned with the patient's well-being and serve the members of the society. Understanding medicine as a profession explains its ethics in terms of the profession's unique position in a society.

Competence, caring, and trustworthiness define the core content of medicine's professional responsibilities. These ideas were repeatedly expressed by conference participants. Professionalism requires physicians to be knowledgeable and skilled, and to continuously update their expertise and proficiency. Professionalism demands that physicians suppress self-interest, in the service of the well-being of their patients. Professionalism entails that physicians make themselves into the kinds of people who will be trusted by society and who will be worthy of that trust. And it demands that the institutions of medicine be designed to promote society's trust and not undermine it.

From the presentations, it also became clear that a conception of medicine as a profession defines the medical team as a group of professionals (e.g., physicians, nurses, physician assistants, social workers, nutritionists, patient representatives, physical and occupational therapists) with a shared core of common professional duties. All members have the ethical responsibility to be aware of and responsive to their colleagues' professional duties and to be caring and respectful in their professional interaction with each other. The values and commitments that guide team-based medical decision making must be transparent to patients and the community, because they must be the commitments and values of medical professionalism.

From this perspective, medical ethics can be seen as the sum of moral commitments of all health care professionals. It can be discussed from the perspective of the character, or virtues, that a medical professional must have, as Dr. Pellegrino does. Or it can be discussed from

the perspective of what a physician needs to understand and do, as Dr. Siegler does. Unfortunately, features of the prevailing medical environment, current social practices, and contemporary legal decisions can impede or undermine professional behavior, as Drs. Morreim, Hafferty, and Bloom explain.

The conceptual understanding of "professionalism" has obvious implications for the education of society's future doctors. Medical education should, of course, promote professional competency. The educational process should also promote the development of the essential habits of disposition and attitude to perform as a good physician should, that is, the character (i.e., virtues) of a good physician. In other words, as a part of medical education, medical ethics education should primarily be concerned with inculcating medical professionalism. This involves helping students to understand the content and the justification of their special responsibilities as physicians as well as to accept their professional responsibilities as important and overriding. Medical education has to pay serious attention to these aspects of physician training. We have to help our students to understand their professional responsibilities, to be people who have the requisite character, and enable them to do the right thing as the well-formed professional would do it. That is the essence of professionalism.

Regrettably, as Drs. Nierman, Cornwall, and Jennifer Fehser explain, medical education does not always meet its mark. The proceedings of this conference provide insight into areas that require significant attention and commitment from medical educators. The formal and informal curricula of academic medicine must convey to our students that being a doctor is, in a sense, a lifelong commitment to medical professionalism.

#### References

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