

Welcome

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THE EXISTENCE OF THIS CONFERENCE and the extensive medical ethics program of the Mount Sinai School of Medicine led by Dr. Rosamond Rhodes are an indication of the critical role that medical ethics plays at Mount Sinai as an institution and in medical education in particular. In this issue, different perspectives on professionalism, including the history of professionalism, professional responsibilities, education and professionalism, and the perspective of teachers and faculty are analyzed.

I would like to add one other perspective, that of the patient. Following a physician strike in Ontario in 1987 the Canadian government polled the country to determine what outcome Canadian citizens wanted from their medical schools. That exercise, the CanMeds 2000 Project, identified professionalism as one of the five most important qualities of being a physician. Similarly, but not surprisingly, the Accrediting Council of Graduate Medical Education in the United States also highlighted professionalism as one of its five major goals.

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In preparation for this conference I asked three of my patients for their definitions of professionalism. These were patients whom I have known for a long time and who have very different personalities and illnesses. The first said, "Technical expertise is expected. Professionalism has to do with character. It's efficiency and a minimum of fluff. Doctors should not be unduly trying to impress." The second patient commented, "It's a nice personality, patience and follow-up. Accessibility is critical." He then stopped and thought for a long time before continuing. "The doctor making that extra phone call, that extra effort, that's what professionalism is all about." And the last patient said, "Professionalism is critical. It's a good bedside manner. It's empathy, a total interest in the patient, including the medical, social and psychological aspects of that person. It's the way the doctor speaks to the patient." This person also paused, stared at his fingers and then went on. "First impression is very important. The doctor must be well groomed and the fingernails must be clean," at which point I quickly glanced at my nails.

What I learned from my patients is that they all have very different definitions of what professionalism is, but they all felt that it was at the core of being a doctor. Their remarks highlight the importance of these proceedings.