

Professionalism is a way of life



By Melinda C. Joyce

“Professionalism” is a term that gets used freely in the pharmacy world. Programs, articles, white papers, and other approaches have been used to disseminate information about what constitutes professionalism. All such efforts are helpful, but professionalism is very much an individual trait. There are core ideas that are paramount to being professional, but transforming core ideas into daily living is an individual endeavor. Professionalism is not just something for student pharmacists to work toward, it is a thought process for all, whether someone has been practicing for 3 months, 3 years, or 30 years.

Although one’s values are generally learned as a child, embracing a professional demeanor and attitude is a lifelong journey. Along the path to professionalism, there are many lessons. It is possible to learn skills that will enhance professionalism and to see behaviors that detract from professionalism. All of these lessons melded together make up the individual approach to a professional way of life.

A professional’s traits

According to the *White Paper on Pharmacy Student Professionalism* (www.aphanet.org/students/whitepaper.pdf), a professional is a member of a profession who displays the following 10 traits: knowledge and skills of a profession, commitment to self-improvement of skills and knowledge, service orientation, pride in the profession, a covenantal relationship with the client, creativity and innovation, conscience and trustworthiness, accountability for his/her work, ethically sound decision making, and leadership.

Many pharmacists have exemplary knowledge of and skills in pharmacy and patient care and are deeply committed to self-improvement. Student pharmacists’ first exposure to the wealth of drug knowledge comes through pharmacy school faculty. The second exposure comes from interactions with practitioners. After pharmacy school, the results of these experiences are displayed through attending professional meetings, reading journals, and making the commitment to lifelong learning.

Maintain rigorous standards

Academic honesty is expected of students. A student who cheats on an exam lacks the skills being tested. Pharmacists who allow their technicians or interns to do their continuing education (CE) assignments are cheating, too. Perhaps this does not sound like a big deal, but if someone is inclined to be dishonest about CE credits, that person

may also be inclined to be dishonest when keeping controlled substances inventories.

Service orientation and pride in the profession are traits often associated with professionalism because they are visible. Pride in the profession of pharmacy is not just about being active in pharmacy organizations. The way one conducts daily activities must also reflect pride in being a pharmacist. It may be possible for a pharmacist who attends his or her local pharmacy meetings to tell a high school student not to consider a career in pharmacy because of problems with third party insurance programs. Is this pharmacist exhibiting professional behavior? Contrast these actions with those of a pharmacist who attends local pharmacy meetings but also attends career days at local high schools and encourages teens to pursue career opportunities in pharmacy.

Having good relationships with patients—being conscientious, trustworthy, and accountable for one’s work—is the mark of a true pharmacy professional. The traits listed in the preceding sentence are those seen most often by patients and health care providers. Consider a preceptor who laughs at a patient’s condition or a pharmacist who refers to a patient as the “goner in bed three.” If enough pharmacists acted in this manner, it could quickly become the norm and reverse years of professional socialization.

The last trait of a true professional is leadership. Many people believe that pharmacy leaders are just the people who hold elected offices in pharmacy associations. While those individuals are certainly leaders, there are many others in the profession. Surrounding oneself with people who are leaders while moving down the path of professionalism raises the bar.

A choice

There are many lessons that can be learned along the path toward professionalism. Professionalism is a choice. It is a way of life, not a completed project. It is ongoing.

I challenge each student pharmacist to think about the daily activities and the traits that exemplify professionalism. The last time someone asked you what you were studying, how did you answer? Was there pride in your voice when you told your questioner you were studying to become a pharmacist? What was your attitude when you were approached about attending a pharmacy meeting or running for an office in a pharmacy association?

Patients watch and listen to what pharmacists say and do, and other health care professionals evaluate pharmacists and pharmacy as a whole by observing pharmacists’ actions. For these reasons, professionalism should be a way of life for all pharmacists.

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