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Nurturing E-professionalism in Medical Education: Navigating the Digital Frontier

Nafeeza Mohd Ismail

Department of Pharmacology, Faculty of Medicine, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Sungai Buloh, Selangor, MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

This narrative underscores the paramount importance placed by medical schools worldwide on instilling professionalism in their students within the academic, clinical and digital realms. However, it highlights a compelling lacuna in this endeavour, specifically concerning the guidance provided to medical students in managing their professionalism outside of the structured educational and clinical environments. In an age where social media platforms are omnipresent and easily accessible, the article examines the challenges posed when medical students, following gruelling days in clinical settings, opt to vent their frustrations online. Instances of students pursuing health professions facing expulsion due to seemingly innocuous social media posts are brought to the forefront, shedding light on the imperative need for enhanced awareness and guidance in this digital era. The five key points in the teaching of e-professionalism outlined in this article include safeguarding patient confidentiality, preserving professional boundaries, cultivating respectful online behaviour, advocating transparency in conflicts of interest, and striking a balance with the digital dilemma. I believe these points may well serve as a guide for medical schools. This commentary also includes a list of modules that medical schools may incorporate into their curricula when considering e-professionalism.

Keywords: *E-professionalism, Medical education, Social media, Digital era, Ethical behaviour*

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

Nafeeza Mohd Ismail, Department of Pharmacology, Faculty of Medicine, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Sungai Buloh Campus, 47000 Jalan Hospital, Sungai Buloh, Selangor, Malaysia

Email: nafeeza@uitm.edu.my

INTRODUCTION

Professionalism is a cornerstone of medical education, consistently emphasised by medical schools worldwide within the structured realms of academia and clinical practice. In every corner of the globe, medical schools place a paramount focus on cultivating professionalism among their students within the controlled environments of classrooms, wards, and clinics. However, an intriguing question arises: who provides guidance to these future medical professionals once they step beyond these boundaries? In an age where the power of social media rests at their fingertips, it is common for students, fatigued after exhausting days, to seek solace in sharing their daily struggles. Yet, this act can lead to unintended

consequences, such as posting images of medical procedures or venting frustrations about patients. Shockingly, there have been instances where aspiring healthcare professionals faced expulsion from their programmes, all because they innocently believed their online actions were “harmless” and were unaware of the potential ramifications.

In today’s digital age, social media has seamlessly become an integral part of our communication landscape. Consequently, it has become imperative for healthcare professionals to navigate these platforms with a strong commitment to upholding ethical standards and professionalism. I believe that one effective approach to achieving this goal is the integration of online ethics, commonly referred to as e-professionalism, within the medical curriculum. Esteemed institutions, such as the Ministry of Health Malaysia (MOH) (1), the British Medical Association (BMA) (2), and the General Medical Council (GMC) UK (3), have developed valuable guidelines that can serve as essential resources for this purpose. However, it is important to acknowledge that despite the endorsement of various institutions, e-professionalism integration continues to be a challenging objective to achieve.

One of the key principles emphasised by the GMC (3) is that the standards expected of doctors should remain unwavering when communicating through social media. The foundational tenets of medical practice, including patient confidentiality and respect for colleagues, continue to take precedence. This holds immense importance because the expansive reach and accessibility of social media can easily blur the boundaries between public and private life. Consequently, doctors must regularly assess and adjust their privacy settings to safeguard sensitive information from patients, employers, and organisations.

I believe students are aware of the many advantages of social media that doctors can use to make patient care even better. Engaging in discussions related to public health, forging professional networks, and facilitating access to healthcare information all represent valuable contributions that social media platforms offer. However, it is equally crucial to recognise the associated risks. Upholding professional boundaries remains an integral facet of medical practice, and the GMC’s (3) emphasis on this aspect is commendable. Doctors must adeptly differentiate between their personal and professional profiles and redirect patient inquiries to the appropriate channels when contacted about their care through private profiles.

Social media has both promise and peril (2). Incorporating the benefits of social media into medical students’ learning experiences can offer numerous advantages, such as staying informed about medical advancements, fostering peer connections, and gaining insights into how healthcare professionals engage with the public. While the benefits of social media are evident and hold the potential to enrich the learning experiences of medical students, they also pose ethical and professional challenges and it is imperative to acknowledge and address the associated risks as medical students may not be fully aware of these risks. Research conducted in the United States (US) (4) on the utilisation of new media by medical students, as reported by deans of medical schools, revealed several concerning findings, including breaches of patient confidentiality, the use of discriminatory and offensive language, and the sharing of images depicting intoxication and the use of illicit substances. More recent research has highlighted varying attitudes towards e-professionalism among medical and dental professionals in Saudi Arabia. These findings have raised concerns due to the presence of alarming attitudes and behaviours. Consequently, the authors have called for the establishment of comprehensive national e-professionalism guidelines. These guidelines would serve to safeguard patient rights related to privacy and confidentiality while

also upholding the autonomy, freedom, and integrity of medical and dental practitioners (5).

A fact emphasised by the MOH (1) is the verification of the accuracy and authenticity of news and information shared on social media. This is indeed crucial especially on matters related to public health as false or misleading information can lead to panic, confusion, and potentially harmful actions by the public.

Hence, this commentary underscores the importance of acknowledging that it is the responsibility of educators to impart guidance to students on the “don’ts” of social media. We often want to convey this to the future generation BUT we forget that the future generation is here!

The points below, based on guidelines put forth by all three institutions (1–3), although not exhaustive, are key concerns that medical schools may reference as a guide when instructing students on the topic of e-professionalism.

Safeguarding Patient Confidentiality

Patient confidentiality stands as the cornerstone of medical practice, and medical students must grasp its unequivocal significance. Educators must impress upon them the gravity of safeguarding patient-related information on social media. Even inadvertent disclosures can lead to breaches of ethical and legal standards. It is imperative that students understand the strict prohibition against discussing specific cases or sharing identifiable patient details on public platforms.

Preserving Professional Boundaries

The demarcation between personal and professional lives is a boundary that must remain unassailable. To this end, students need guidance on how to maintain this crucial distinction in the digital realm. Accepting patient requests on personal social media accounts should be discouraged, and professional inquiries should be redirected to appropriate channels. Fostering clarity in this regard is paramount.

Cultivating Respectful Online Behaviour

The principles of respect and professionalism extend seamlessly from face-to-face interactions to online engagements. It is paramount that students are reminded of this fact. Online conduct should reflect the same decorum observed offline. Bullying, harassment, or inappropriate comments about colleagues or patients have no place on social media. Students require guidance on how to navigate these ethical intricacies in their online presence.

Advocating Transparency in Conflicts of Interest

Transparency remains the linchpin of preserving trust and credibility. Students must be educated on the importance of disclosing any financial or commercial ties when posting online. This transparency extends to maintaining trust among peers and the public alike.

The Digital Dilemma

In the era of social media, communication has undergone a profound evolution, granting individuals an unparalleled stage to share their thoughts, experiences, and emotions. For medical students, who often face the rigours and emotional toll of clinical encounters, social media can be an appealing outlet for self-expression. However, this newfound avenue of communication comes with a set of potential pitfalls, some of which students may be unaware of.

Avenues for Venting

The demanding nature of medical education and clinical practice can take a toll on students' emotional well-being. In moments of frustration or exhaustion, many students may turn to social media as a release valve to vent their feelings or sharing their excitement. While this can provide a temporary sense of relief or euphoria, it is crucial to recognise that the digital realm is not devoid of consequences. This section urges medical schools to delve into documented cases where medical students pursuing health profession courses have faced severe consequences, including expulsion, as a result of their social media activity. These instances serve as cautionary tales, illustrating how seemingly innocuous posts can jeopardise one's professional standing and career aspirations.

The Pitfalls of Posting

One cardinal rule that every medical student should internalise is to abstain from posting text or pictures, particularly when in the vicinity of the hospital. The hospital is a sanctuary of patient confidentiality and professionalism, and sharing any aspect of it on social media, even inadvertently, can breach ethical and legal standards. It is imperative for students to exercise discretion and uphold the sacred trust of patient privacy.

The Power of Comments

Beyond refraining from their own posts, medical students must also be wary of engaging with their peers' and colleagues' social media content. A seemingly innocuous comment on a post can have unintended consequences. When discussing matters related to healthcare, patient interactions, or clinical experiences, it is vital to maintain the same level of professionalism as one would in a formal setting.

The Important Miscellaneous

1. **Managing disagreements:** In a landscape where numerous opinions proliferate on social media, clashes of perspective become almost unavoidable. When confronted with content or messages you find disagreeable, it is advisable to maintain a respectful tone. You can opt to present factual information to rectify any misconceptions or, when needed, choose to disregard the post and unfollow the user.
2. **Staying away from trolls:** Trolling is the act of deliberately trying to elicit a negative response from others in online interactions. What sets trolls apart from those providing constructive criticism or expressing disagreements is their lack of genuine

interest in persuading or engaging in meaningful discourse with you. Their primary aim is to provoke a negative reaction. It is often best not to engage with trolls. Ignoring them typically leads them to lose interest and move on. If you do choose to respond, for instance, to correct false information about yourself, it is advisable to maintain a neutral and composed tone.

3. Ensuring your safety online: When encountering messages that are distressing or disruptive, there is an option to mute or block their account. Additionally, posts that constitute harassment, threats (online threats and harassment are illegal) or spam are reportable. Guidance on when and how to report such content should be conveyed to students.
4. Understanding the legal implications of social media: Although social media provides various benefits, it is essential to stay mindful of the potential legal consequences that may arise from its misuse. Engaging in inappropriate behaviour can result in significant legal challenges, including issues like defamation or contempt of court. Hence, it is crucial to consistently exercise caution.

Including e-professionalism in the medical curriculum is important to make sure that future doctors have the skills they need to use technology effectively while still being professional. Before implementing these initiatives, medical institutions must analyse their e-professional education.

Medical schools can begin by identifying gaps and areas for improvement by evaluating their curricula and teaching techniques. Medical schools may evaluate how much e-professionalism is taught, what tools are accessible to make it easier to utilise, and how much students and professors understand and feel ready for this issue.

This assessment can ascertain whether the concept of e-professionalism is appropriately addressed or if there are shortcomings in the education being imparted. After identifying the gaps, e-professionalism can be personalised for the educational institution and its students. The implementation of this measure ensures that the curriculum remains both pertinent and adaptable to the dynamic problems and opportunities arising from the digital era.

By using this method, medical schools can actively and proficiently incorporate e-professionalism, training a new generation of healthcare professionals who not only understand the importance of digital professionalism but also know how to use it with confidence and honesty.

1. In light of the deficiencies identified during their examination of e-professionalism, I propose several modules, components, or elements that medical schools may consider incorporating into their curricula upon integration.
2. Dedicated modules: Create specific modules or courses that address e-professionalism, covering topics like online communication, social media usage, and maintaining patient confidentiality in the digital age.
3. Case studies: Use real-life case studies to illustrate the potential pitfalls and benefits of e-professionalism in healthcare, encouraging students to critically analyse and discuss their implications.
4. Simulations: Develop online or computer-based simulations that simulate online interactions with patients and peers, allowing students to practice professional behaviour in a controlled environment.

5. **Role-playing:** Integrate role-playing exercises where students take on the roles of both healthcare professionals and patients to understand the dynamics of online communication and empathise with patient concerns.
6. **Ethics discussions:** Encourage open discussions on ethical dilemmas related to e-professionalism, helping students develop a deeper understanding of the issues at play.
7. **Guest speakers:** Invite professionals who have experience in e-professionalism to share their insights and real-world experiences, offering valuable perspectives beyond the classroom.
8. **Social media guidelines:** Provide guidelines on the appropriate use of social media and online forums, emphasising the potential impact on a healthcare professional's reputation and patient trust.
9. **Feedback and evaluation:** Incorporate self-assessment and peer-review processes to evaluate students' e-professionalism, fostering self-awareness and continuous improvement.
10. **Research projects:** Encourage students to research and report on emerging trends and best practices in e-professionalism, contributing to the body of knowledge in this field.
11. **Continuing education:** Emphasise the importance of ongoing education in e-professionalism as digital technology and communication platforms to continually evolve.

These strategies can help medical students develop the necessary skills and awareness to maintain professionalism in the digital era.

DISCUSSION

The healthcare profession places exceptionally high expectations on its practitioners, and this reality can prove to be one of the most vexing aspects of the job for many healthcare workers. What often troubles them is the stark contrast they observe between their own social media presence and that of their friends. While their friends can freely share the ups and downs of their day or express personal sentiments without adverse consequences, healthcare professionals must tread carefully, cognizant that any misstep on social media could be interpreted as incompetence, insensitivity, or even ethical breaches, potentially haunting their careers.

The most challenging aspect of this dilemma lies in the fact that social media demands unwavering professionalism around the clock. For new healthcare professionals, this transition to constant e-professionalism can be particularly daunting. While we dedicate a considerable amount of time to teaching students to embody professionalism within the controlled confines of the institution, online personas present an entirely different challenge, often with minimal oversight.

It is essential to acknowledge that professionalism does not switch on automatically; it requires a conscious effort, especially when the boundaries between personal and professional life blur on social media. For the next generation of healthcare professionals, some of whom are accustomed to sharing every aspect of their lives online, this adjustment may pose significant challenges, with little room for error.

CONCLUSION

The digital age has ushered in new challenges for medical educators as they strive to instil professionalism in their students. It is imperative that medical schools recognise the necessity of providing guidance beyond the traditional educational and clinical settings. Awareness campaigns, workshops, and clear guidelines for responsible social media use should be integrated into medical curricula to equip future healthcare professionals with the skills necessary to navigate the digital frontier while upholding the highest standards of professionalism.

The GMC's guidance regarding doctors' use of social media offers a comprehensive and vital structure for upholding professionalism and ethical standards in the modern digital era. It underscores both the potential advantages and potential pitfalls linked to social media, all while underscoring the fundamental principles that should steer doctors in their online engagements. Complying with this guidance is imperative for preserving the integrity of the medical field and guaranteeing the utmost level of patient care within an ever-more interconnected global landscape.

Lastly, the importance of declaring conflicts of interest in online posts cannot be overstated. Transparency about financial or commercial interests in healthcare organisations or pharmaceutical companies is essential to maintain trust and integrity in the medical profession.

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