
ANALYSES/REVIEW OF LITERATURE

“Profession”: A Working Definition for Medical Educators

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Purpose: *To provide a working definition of professionalism for medical educators.*

Summary: *Thus far, the literature has not provided a concise and inclusive definition of the word profession. There appears to be a need for one as a basis for teaching the cognitive aspects of the subject and for evaluating behaviors characteristic of professionals. Furthermore, a knowledge of the meaning of the word is important as it serves as the basis of the contract between medicine and society, and hence, of the obligations required of medicine to sustain the contract. A definition is proposed based on the Oxford English Dictionary and the literature on the subject. It is suggested that this can be useful to medical educators with responsibilities for teaching about the professions, professional responsibilities, and professional behavior.*

Conclusions: *The proposed definition is as follows:*

Profession: An occupation whose core element is work based upon the mastery of a complex body of knowledge and skills. It is a vocation in which knowledge of some department of science or learning or the practice of an art founded upon it is used in the service of others. Its members are governed by codes of ethics and profess a commitment to competence, integrity and morality, altruism, and the promotion of the public good within their domain. These commitments form the basis of a social contract between a profession and society, which in return grants the profession a monopoly over the use of its knowledge base, the right to considerable autonomy in practice and the privilege of self-regulation. Professions and their members are accountable to those served and to society.

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Until recently, the medical literature, although referring frequently to professions, has not provided an inclusive definition of the word *profession*. As the medical profession and its educational institutions seek to improve the teaching and evaluation of profes-

sionalism and professional behavior, there is a need for a concise and comprehensive working definition of profession, which serves as the etymological root of the related and frequently used words *professional* and *professionalism*.¹ As medicine attempts to preserve the

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values traditionally associated with professions,²⁻⁴ a definition of profession is a useful starting point. The last quarter century has seen wide agreement that a social contract exists between medicine and the society that it serves and that this contract is based on the concept of the profession.²⁻⁵ Under the terms of the contract, professions are granted status, privileges, and financial rewards on the understanding that they will be devoted to service, will guarantee competence, be moral in their endeavours, and address society's concerns. The contract, which has traditionally been largely unwritten, has undergone substantial changes during the most recent decades, and neither medicine nor society seem satisfied with its present state.⁴

In view of the importance of the subject, it is surprising that there is no agreed on definition of profession in the extensive literature on the subject, found largely in the social sciences. There have been widely differing interpretations as how best to describe professions, with some authors analyzing the professional-client relationship⁶ or classifying a series of "traits" as being characteristic of professions.^{7,8} Still others have been concerned with professions as institutions⁹ or viewed professions as a means of occupational control^{10,11} and dominance.^{12,13} Rather than a precise definition, nearly all begin with a two or three sentence description of profession containing common elements; work based on command of a complex body of knowledge, autonomy (sometimes linked to self-regulation), and service. None of these descriptions include all of the major elements implied by the word profession.

Many organizations and individuals have been addressing the issue of the professions and professionalism in a serious and constructive fashion. In addition, there is now a growing body of medical literature easily available to physicians, including a new "Physician's Charter."¹⁴ Recent works in this literature^{4,15-18} have used an approach similar to that of the sociologists, giving a brief introductory section outlining the concept of the profession in general terms, followed by an explication of the traits and characteristic of professions and professionals.

In our publications, we have taken a different approach.¹⁹⁻²³ We believe that a definition should be precise and that a list of attributes, characteristics, or behavioral patterns is too broad to serve as one. Furthermore, we believe that these qualities should properly be included in a definition of professionalism as they are derived from the word profession. Until recently, in our teaching we used the definition found in the Oxford English Dictionary,¹ but found it necessary to expand on it during discussion of the concept, adding elements drawn from the social sciences. The Oxford definition, although outstanding in the elements included, is not totally satisfactory as it, of necessity, attempts to be very broad and thus does not include several aspects that the

literature outlines as essential, such as autonomy and self-regulation.^{1-3,6,12,23} It also fails to recognize the evolution of the concept to reflect changes in the social contract.^{1-3,24,25} We believe that the dictionary definition, when combined with the literature, provide reasonably sound evidence of society's understanding of the word and that it is society along with the professions that must define the term. Finally, we believe that educational activities aimed at teaching the role of the professions in society and evaluating professional behavior should start with a firm understanding of the meaning of the word.

An important point must be emphasized. Profession is a term used to describe many occupations and is therefore generic. A definition must be broad enough to apply to the other knowledge-based occupations such as law, the clergy, accounting, architecture and engineering, which have been termed *status professions*.⁸ Both the traditions and the laws relating to them are similar to those in medicine^{3,6,9} as is the public perception of their place in society.³ Although they have much in common, the services provided by individual professions differ; therefore, the attributes and behaviors ascribed to them under the rubric of professionalism may vary.

We suggest the following definition as a base for teaching professionalism. This definition uses as its core that of the Oxford English Dictionary¹ and adds those elements included in the social sciences literature that have emerged with the changing relation between the professions and society. It is also compatible with the much less complete material included in Webster's International Dictionary of the English Language²⁶:

Profession: An occupation whose core element is work based upon the mastery of a complex body of knowledge and skills. It is a vocation in which knowledge of some department of science or learning or the practice of an art founded upon it is used in the service of others. Its members are governed by codes of ethics and profess a commitment to competence, integrity and morality, altruism, and the promotion of the public good within their domain. These commitments form the basis of a social contract between a profession and society, which in return grants the profession a monopoly over the use of its knowledge base, the right to considerable autonomy in practice and the privilege of self-regulation. Professions and their members are accountable to those served and to society.

There is little argument that a profession does constitute both an occupation and a vocation and that its members deal with complex knowledge. An assurance of competence has always been critical to trust in a professional and altruistic service has been recognized as necessary to the proper practice of a profession, as have the personal characteristics of morality and integ-

ity. The word *profess* refers to the public commitment to values and activities that is made during the recital of the Hippocratic Oath or its modern equivalent.²⁷ The monopoly over the use of a specific body of knowledge and skills has been codified by licensing laws,^{3,4} and the autonomy, although significant, has always been limited by legislation and by custom.^{2,5,28} This definition also makes explicit the fact that rights and privileges are not inherent, but are granted by society^{1-3,13} in return for certain behaviors and skills. This reflects the concept and the substance of the social contract. Finally, it recognizes that we are accountable to both our patients and to society for our actions and our services,²⁸ something that was implicit in the past but is now an obligation.

Medicine's power and status have undergone a well-documented change in contemporary society^{1-3,13,24,25} as the state or the corporate sector have become more dominant in health care, diminishing medicine's status and influence. As this occurs, it becomes both more important and more difficult to maintain medicine's professional commitments and values. Nevertheless, it is something that should be done as all evidence indicates that society itself continues to wish its physicians to fulfill the traditional professional role and to reflect its values.^{4,24,29-31} The proposed definition is consistent with both the earlier literature and more recent works that have recorded the changing power relations. It seems axiomatic that an educational activity aimed at teaching an abstract concept should begin by defining the concept. For that reason, it is our hope that the proposed definition will assist in the teaching of professionalism and as a base for evaluating professional behavior.

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