

RESEARCH ARTICLES

Using the Humanities to Strengthen the Concept of Professionalism Among First-professional Year Pharmacy Students

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Objectives. To engage pharmacy students at the McWhorter School of Pharmacy in an authentic discussion of professionalism early in their education.

Methods. A booklet was prepared that included several classic short stories and essays that dealt with professionalism. This booklet was sent to all entering students in the class of 2008 and 2009 during the summer prior to their first-professional year of the PharmD program. The stories and essays were discussed in small groups with faculty facilitation during orientation when the students first arrived on campus. A survey instrument was created and administered to assess the impact of this innovative approach to enhancing professionalism.

Results. The program was well received and engaged our pharmacy students in a productive discussion on professionalism. Both classes' mean scores on survey items related that the students were engaged in the discussion of professionalism. Survey results pertaining to professional behavior also indicated increased awareness of the importance of professionalism.

Conclusion. Enhancing professionalism requires a culture change that necessitates addressing professionalism at its core, a calling to serve, in a persistent and continual manner. Requiring students to read and think about professionalism in a novel way, before they even begin their first-professional year of pharmacy school, appears to be an effective approach to nurturing/encouraging professionalism.

Keywords: professionalism, literature, humanities, vocation

INTRODUCTION

Professionalism is a major topic of discussion in pharmacy today. This is evident in the publications and meetings of pharmacy associations such as the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy (AACP) and the American Pharmacists Association (APhA), and pharmacy organizations such as Rho Chi and Phi Lambda Sigma. The topic of professionalism also seems to be ubiquitous at pharmacy schools, engaging faculty members and students alike.^{1,2} Pharmacy education, like education in other healthcare disciplines, is quite concerned with the development of quality healthcare practitioners: the professional. The AACP Excellence Paper entitled "Student Professionalism," has certainly met its stated goal of challenging the pharmacy education community to become engaged in addressing professionalism.³ This paper reports on a novel project initiated at the McWhorter School of Pharmacy at Samford University

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that engages our students in a discussion of professionalism before they begin their first-professional year of pharmacy school.

A major obstacle in discussing professionalism is the ambiguity of the word. Definitions are as abundant as they are varied.⁴ We have adopted and modified the following definition from the American Association of Medical Colleges Task Force on Professionalism: "Professionalism is the enactment of the values and ideals of individuals who are called, as pharmacists, to serve individuals and populations, whose care is entrusted to them, prioritizing the interests of those they serve above their own."⁵ We believe that this definition addresses professionalism at its core: the calling to serve. The bicycle wheel conceptualization of professionalism, evoked by Hammer et al in their extensive review of professionalism in pharmacy, describes professionalism as having a center consisting of values associated with professionalism, such as altruism, caring, honor, integrity and duty, and spokes that arise from this center that represent behaviors associated with professionalism, such as respect, accountability, empathy, and compassion.³ And finally, the outer tire itself, representing the surface of professionalism and such things as professional dress, courtesy, and punctuality.

We hypothesize that at the very core of the hub of this “bicycle wheel” model of professionalism is this sense of a “calling” and a desire to “serve” that is the essence of our above-stated definition of professionalism. A powerful way of strengthening and nurturing professionalism is by studying classic literature. Through their stories, great authors have the ability to impact the pharmacy student as a whole person: intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. Thus they have a unique ability to enhance the “head-to-heart” connection and therefore strengthen the calling to serve.

Great literature can help professionals develop and sustain professionalism. As students think about and empathize with the dilemmas that characters in these stories face, they come to better understand their patients, as well as themselves. Robert Coles, who teaches a course on literature and medicine at Harvard University School of Medicine writes, “Again and again, instructed by novelists, students remind themselves of life’s contingencies; and in so doing, they take matters of choice and commitment more seriously than they might otherwise have done.”⁶

Furthermore, much of the unprofessional behavior that is capturing the public’s attention today deals with moral dilemmas that the great authors have a way of getting at so effectively. Quite often the source of the unprofessional behavior is what Hammer et al refer to as self-centeredness.³ This tends to feed a sense of entitlement and an ensuing disregard for the patient. The great literature abounds with stories that we can reflect upon to remind us of what it is we really want to do. Robert Coles says it well in his “Foreword” to *Chekhov’s Doctors*:

Chekhov wanted, for those doctors he rendered, a confrontation that would disclose the truth of their moral (and spiritual) lives; he has accidents and incidents befall them, and the outcome stirs us to consider ourselves—who we are, what we hold dear, and what we will all too willingly forego (loyalties and obligations we might set aside with an abandon, and at a price, under certain circumstances). Through a writer’s talent, the writer’s way of letting things happen in the plot unfolded, we may indeed squirm as we learn of the substantial squirming that occurs in the Chekhovian tales of professional obligation and duty and become, commonly, the victims of an enveloping and overweening ambition and pride. . .⁷

The authors feel that professionalism is a very serious topic and that the humanities offer a powerful way of addressing it.

Speaking of medical students, Rachel Naomi Remen, the keynote speaker at the 2004 AACP annual meeting in Salt Lake City, stated the following, which is readily related to pharmacy students: “under the influence of

a hidden curriculum that often runs counter to humanistic values, students tend to adopt a professional stance that devalues the service impulse that brought them to medicine in the first place.”⁸ It is this project’s goal to place value on the service impulse that brought our students to pharmacy by strengthening and nurturing this service impulse through the great authors’ stories.

After conducting extensive student interviews as part of his research on diversity, Harvard University Professor Richard J. Light concluded that in order for students to really believe that a school considers something important, the student has to “do” something.⁹ Just talking about diversity or professionalism and not assigning the student something specific to do rings hollow with the student with regard to level of importance. Our objective was to develop a novel approach to enhancing professionalism using literary reading assignments from the humanities to strengthen the head-to-heart connection and the calling to serve in our entering pharmacy students. We hypothesized that this service impulse is at the core of professionalism.

METHODS

A booklet containing an introduction and 4 short stories was compiled and mailed to each student in the entering pharmacy class of 2008 and class of 2009. A cover letter was included that assigned this “summer reading” project and instructed students to be prepared to discuss the stories in small groups facilitated by faculty members during orientation.

Each of the 4 short stories included in the booklet was selected because it encompassed components of professionalism. Before the stories were reproduced and compiled into a booklet, permission was obtained from the respective publishers. The booklets were printed by Sanford University Press. The front cover was embossed with the Bowl of Hygeia and entitled, *The Profession of Pharmacy as a Calling to Serve: Using the Humanities to Nurture the Head-to-Heart Connection*.

Although there are many stories that nurture the head-to-heart connection that is so vital to professionalism, the 4 stories we elected to include in the booklet were chosen because of particular elements that apply to the pharmacy profession. The first selection was Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Birthmark,”¹⁰ the story of a scientist who becomes obsessed with removing a minor blemish from his wife’s cheek. This scientist’s quest for perfection certainly seems to disconnect his head from his heart, with catastrophic consequences. The second selection was Flannery O’Connor’s “Introduction” to *A Memoir of Mary Ann*,¹¹ a true story about a young girl who suffered from a grotesque and debilitating tumor on her face. She

goes to a home for terminal cancer patients, but lives much longer than expected and has a very positive impact on those who meet her. The third story included was *The Velveteen Rabbit*, written by Margery Williams.¹² This children’s story demonstrates the power of caring and concern to transform. The final short story chosen was “At the Pharmacy”¹³ by the Russian physician-author Anton Chekhov. This poignant story captures human anguish and suffering in the face of a cold and uncaring pharmacist.

During student orientation in the fall semester, the incoming first-year professional class was divided into small groups ranging from 8 to 10 students. Each of the resulting 13 small groups was facilitated by a faculty volunteer. The facilitated small groups met for 1.5 hours during which the stories and how they related to professionalism were discussed.

Following the discussion sessions, a brief assessment of the program was administered to all first-year students. A week later during one of the first-year courses, a professionalism survey instrument was given to all first-professional year (P1) pharmacy students. A Likert scale was used in the survey instruments. In the program assessment (Table 1), the following scale was used: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral/no opinion, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree. In the professionalism survey (Table 2) the Likert scale utilized was: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree. In addition, this professionalism survey was repeated with the second-professional year (P2) pharmacy students (class of 2008), who participated in the discussion of stories during the previous year’s orientation as P1 students.

Several of the questions in the survey tapped areas of interest such as a student’s perceived spiritual interest in pursuing pharmacy and whether the student felt “called” to the profession. These components of professionalism differ from those included in traditional professionalism surveys presented in the literature. This survey, though cross-sectional in nature when given to the first-year class (2009), was also administered in a longitudinal manner to the second-year class (2008), who had participated in the orientation professionalism program the previous year.

As a control, prepharmacy students enrolled at Samford University also participated in the professionalism survey. The prepharmacy control group included all students in their freshman year at Samford University. Our pharmacy students had to have completed a minimum of 2 years of prepharmacy work prior to starting their first-professional year of pharmacy school.

RESULTS

Of the 123 P1 (class of 2008) students who participated in the program, 111 (90.2%) completed the assessment forms. The participation results from the second year of implementation (P1, class of 2009) were similar with 107 (87.0%) students completing the assessment. The results obtained from the assessment survey (Table 1) and professionalism survey (Table 2) after the small group sessions indicated that students were engaged by the short stories and program concerning issues of pharmacy and professionalism. The students were asked whether the stories stimulated their thinking on a deeper level with regard to the profession of pharmacy. On this

Table 1. First-professional Year Pharmacy Students’ Responses to a Survey Regarding the Use of Classic Literature as Part of an Orientation Program Intended to Strengthen the Concept of Professionalism

	Mean Response*	
	Class of 2008, n = 111	Class of 2009, n = 107
The stories stimulated my thinking, regarding the pharmacy profession, on a deeper level.	4.2	3.9
I read the entire collection of stories.	4.8	4.6
The stories challenged me to think about becoming a professional.	4.2	3.9
The overall program made me feel welcome to the school of pharmacy.	4.7	4.4
As a result of this program, I feel more comfortable at the school of pharmacy.	4.4	4.2
I would recommend this session to next year’s class.	4.4	4.3
Overall, the program was personally meaningful.	4.3	4.1
This program enhanced a greater sense of calling to serve in the pharmacy profession.	4.3	4.1

*Responses were based on a Likert scale on which 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral/no opinion, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree

Table 2. Pharmacy Students' Responses to a Professionalism Survey

	Mean Response to Survey Item*			
	Class of 2008 (P1), n = 114	Class of 2008 (P2), n = 104	Class of 2009 (P1), n = 112	Pre-pharmacy Students, [†] n = 39
I am pursuing a career in pharmacy out of a desire to follow my spiritual calling.	2.9	3.0	3.3	2.9
I believe pharmacy is a profession.	3.9	3.9	3.9	3.8
I enjoy working with others.	3.7	3.6	3.7	3.7
I chose to attend this pharmacy school at Samford because this school will help develop me as a professional.	3.7	3.5	3.6	3.9
My spiritual walk will have a positive influence on my professional life.	3.5	3.6	3.7	3.5
I must enjoy working with others in order to be a professional.	3.4	3.2	3.2	3.3
I chose to attend pharmacy school at Samford because this school will help me fulfill my career calling.	3.6	3.5	3.7	3.7
In general, the pharmacists I know behave in a professional manner.	3.5	3.1	3.4	3.4
I would be willing to make personal sacrifices in order to help a patient.	3.5	3.4	3.4	3.5
There is a difference between a patient and a customer.	3.0	3.6	3.5	2.9
Working well with others is an important component of being a professional.	3.7	3.5	3.6	3.6
My spiritual life greatly influenced my decision to pursue pharmacy as a career.	3.0	3.1	3.1	2.9
I believe I have a purpose in life.	3.8	3.8	3.8	3.8
I will need to help others in my professional life in order to be happy.	3.4	3.2	3.4	3.5
In general, the faculty I know behave in a professional manner.	3.7	3.5	3.6	3.8

*A Likert scale was used on which 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree

[†]Control group

question, the class of 2008 had a mean score of 4.2 on a Likert scale of 1-5, indicating they agreed with the statement. For the same question, the class of 2009 had a mean score of 3.9. Students in both years indicated that the program was personally meaningful (class of 2008, mean = 4.3; class of 2009, mean = 4.1).

Of the 123 first-professional year students in the class of 2008, 114 (92.6%) completed the survey. The survey was repeated during the second year in pharmacy school for the class of 2008 (P2, class of 2008) and at this time 104 students (85%) completed the survey. In the second year of implementation, 112 (91.0%) first-professional year students from the class of 2009 completed the survey. Of the 42 Samford prepharmacy students in the control group, 39 (93%) completed the professionalism survey instrument.

When students were asked if their spiritual life greatly influenced their decision to pursue pharmacy as a career, the mean response for the class of 2008 (P1) was 3.0; for the class of 2008 (P2), 3.1; for the class of 2009 (P1), 3.1, and for the prepharmacy control group, 2.9. When students were asked whether there was a difference between a patient and a customer, the mean response for the class of 2008 (P1) was 3.0; for the class of 2008 (P2), 3.6; for the class of 2009 (P1), 3.5; and for the prepharmacy control group, 2.9. Another indicator that the program initiated an upward trend in responses was the survey results from the item that questioned whether the students' spiritual walk would have a positive influence on their professional life, the response for the class of 2008 (P1) was 3.5; for the class of 2008 (P2), 3.6; for the class of 2009 (P1), 3.7; and for the prepharmacy control group, 3.5. The reliability of

the professionalism survey items was 0.798 as determined by the Cronbach alpha coefficient.

DISCUSSION

Overall, the mean scores obtained from the professionalism survey suggest that the program had a positive influence on how the students viewed professional attributes and their role in pharmacy as a profession.

When the mean responses of pharmacy students who participated in the professionalism program were compared with those of prepharmacy students in the control group, there appeared to be an upward trending in several items (Table 2). In particular, upward trending was seen for those items that reflected a deep sense of personal mission and calling to serve, such as relating their spiritual life to the profession of pharmacy. Also, this upward trending effect was reflected in the survey responses, which indicated a greater understanding that they were dealing with patients as opposed to customers. There were several incidents in the stories that may have enhanced this head-to-heart connection and stimulated deeper thinking with regard to the pharmacy profession as reflected in the results in Table 1, in particular the first response item. In addition, continued upward trending was observed in the class of 2008, as they progressed from their first-professional year to their second-professional year, indicating that we had successfully implemented an underlying theme in the curriculum that values the service impulse that led our students to pharmacy initially. This observation was further strengthened by the more positive responses on these same survey items, relating their spiritual life to the profession, for the class of 2009 during their first-professional year. Finally, the overall scores of our prepharmacy control group indicated that a major focus on professionalism should be to maintain and strengthen this service impulse that students possess when they begin their professional education.

This project is an ongoing program and has become a mainstay of our orientation for incoming first-professional year pharmacy students. We have had excellent buy-in from our faculty members, and well over 50% of the faculty and administration have voluntarily participated in small-group facilitation. The broad faculty participation is enhancing faculty development in the area of professionalism, which is so important in the mentoring aspects of professionalism. We are creating a healthy “informal” or underlying theme to our curriculum that supports professionalism development at its core: the calling to serve. The current professionalism crisis in our culture at large, and the affected microcosm of the pharmacy profession, will not succumb to a quick fix. This preliminary data indicated an upward trending in

critical areas of professional development after the program was implemented. However, it takes time to change the culture that supports a hidden curriculum, and our long-term studies will more clearly evaluate the impact of this program.

This ongoing project is currently in its third year of implementation and after next year our entire student body will have undergone this orientation to professionalism. As an ongoing way of cultivating and facilitating professionalism throughout the students’ 4 years of training, these stories provide a focus point to which our faculty members, and student organizations, can refer in order to emphasize the head-to-heart connection so crucial to professionalism.

Utilizing the humanities in professional education is not a new development. The use of assigned readings preceding the beginning of class has been used in medical school education.¹⁴ Student evaluations of this program were also positive and the results from this study suggested that this exercise was a meaningful experience in the students’ development of professional attitudes and behaviors. In fact, the pharmacy literature describes the use of humanities in an undergraduate professional elective course and the need for humanities scholarship in pharmacy education.^{15,16} However, by incorporating the small group discussions covering the pre-assigned short stories into the first-professional year orientation, our students realize the importance of strengthening the head-to-heart connection from the beginning of the professional program, and that our school takes professionalism seriously.

CONCLUSION

At the McWhorter School of Pharmacy, a unique program was incorporated into the orientation program for first-professional year students that uses literary stories from the humanities to strengthen the sense of a “calling to serve,” which we propose is the core of professionalism. Survey results indicate that we successfully engaged our students in a discussion of professionalism early in their professional pharmacy careers. Although our pharmacy school is part of a distinctively Christian university, we recognize that the rewards of a humanities education, and the accompanying development of humanistic perspectives of caring and service, are timeless values across the pharmacy curriculum, regardless of religious orientation.

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