

Medical professionalism

(Update 2005)

The environment in which medicine is practised in Canada is undergoing rapid and profound change. There are now continued opportunities for the medical profession to provide leadership for our patients, our communities and our colleagues through strengthened professionalism. The Canadian Medical Association (CMA) is strongly committed to medical professionalism and has developed this policy both to inform physicians and others about its meaning and value and to promote its preservation and enhancement. This document outlines the major features of medical professionalism, the opportunities which exist in this area and the challenges which lie before us.

Why Medical Professionalism?

The medical profession is characterized by a strong commitment to the well-being of patients, high standards of ethical conduct, mastery of an ever-expanding body of knowledge and skills, and a high level of clinical independence. As individuals, physicians' personal values may vary, but as members of the medical profession they are expected to share and uphold those values that characterize the practice of medicine and the care of patients.

Medical professionalism includes both the relationship between a physician and a patient and a social contract between physicians and society. Society grants the profession privileges, including exclusive or primary responsibility for the provision of certain services and a high degree of self-regulation. In return, the profession agrees to use these privileges primarily for the benefit of others and only secondarily for its own benefit. Three major features of medical profes-

sionalism — the ethic of care, clinical independence and self-regulation — benefit physicians, their patients and society:

Ethic of care: This is characterized by the values of compassion, beneficence, nonmaleficence, respect for persons and justice (CMA's Code of Ethics). Society benefits from the ethic of care whereby, in the provision of medical services, physicians put the interests of others ahead of their own. Dedication and commitment to the well-being of others is clearly in the interests of patients, who are the primary beneficiaries.

Clinical independence: Medicine is a highly complex art and science. Through lengthy training and experience, physicians become medical experts and healers. Whereas patients have the right to decide to a large extent which medical interventions they will undergo, they expect their physicians to be free to make clinically appropriate recommendations.

Although physicians recognize that they are accountable to patients, funding agencies and their peers for their recommendations, unreasonable restraints on clinical autonomy imposed by governments and administrators, whether public or private, are not in the best interests of patients, not least because they can damage the trust that is an essential component of the patient-physician relationship. Conversely, physicians are not morally obliged to provide inappropriate medical services when requested by patients despite their respect for patient autonomy.

Self-regulation: Physicians have traditionally been granted this privilege by society. It includes the control of entrance into the profession by establishing educational standards and setting examinations, the licensing of physicians, and the

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establishment and ongoing review of standards of medical practice. In return for this privilege, physicians are expected to hold each other accountable for their behaviour and for the outcomes they achieve on behalf of their patients. Self-regulation is exercised by many different professional organizations, from medical practice partnerships to the statutory provincial/territorial licensing bodies. It has evolved into a partnership with the public. Self-regulation benefits society by taking the best advantage of the professional expertise needed to appropriately set and maintain standards of training and practice, while providing suitable accountability in matters of professional behaviour. The profession's commitment to the maintenance of those standards is demonstrated by its willingness to participate in outcomes review at many levels, from institutional quality assurance activities to formal prospective peer review, and to actively support their statutory and legislated licensing authorities.

Opportunities in Medical Professionalism

Over the past few years much has been written about the issue of medical professionalism in both the lay and scientific media. The practice of medicine has changed considerably, and with these changes have come challenges but also opportunities. The medical profession continues to be a greatly respected one, and it is still generally seen as being distinct from many others because of the unique nature of the physician-patient relationship. There exists now an opportunity to reinforce the professional values and priorities that have sustained medicine for so long, and to embrace new approaches which will serve it well in the years to come.

Medical professionals must recognize that patients have a wide variety of resources available for their health care needs, from traditional physician services to paramedical practitioners, to complementary medicine and to information obtained from the internet. While maintaining responsibility for care of the patient as a whole, physicians must be able to interact constructively with other health care providers within an interdisciplinary team setting, and must be able to interpret information for patients and direct them to appropriate and accurate resources.

The relationship of physicians with their colleagues must be strengthened and reinforced. Patient care benefits when all health care practitioners work together towards a common goal, in an atmosphere of support and collegiality.

Although there are some challenges to professionalism, as outlined below, the greatest opportunity before us may be to remind physicians of the reasons they chose a career in medi-

cine to begin with — for many, it is a calling rather than a job. In spite of the numerous recent changes in the health care system and the practice of medicine, the primary reason most physicians entered the field remains the same — the sanctity of the fiduciary relationship between physicians and their patients. The renewal of medical professionalism must be led from within the profession itself, and the CMA and its members are in a unique position to take advantage of the many opportunities which exist and to respond to the challenges we face.

Challenges to Medical Professionalism

Medical professionalism is being challenged from within and without. These challenges arise from pressures that may serve to undermine the ethic of care, clinical independence and self-regulation and may result, for individual physicians and the medical profession, in diminished morale and changes in lifestyle and practice patterns. These changes may have a detrimental impact on the health of physicians, and also on the quality of patient care.

Resource restraints: The CMA has identified scarcity of resources, whether human or material, as undermining the ability of physicians to maintain excellence in clinical care, research and teaching. Although much attention has been paid recently to the insufficient number of physicians in Canada, and although recent developments indicate some limited cause for optimism, much work remains to be done. Issues of access to continuing professional development, workforce sustainability, inadequate numbers of training positions for new doctors, the integration of foreign-trained physicians into the workforce and the apparent inability of governments to resolve inadequacies in health care funding continue to frustrate physicians' attempts to achieve their professional goals and care for their patients. These factors all have the potential for contributing to the decline of professional morale.

Bureaucratic challenges: This refers to the introduction of layers of management and policy directives between the physician and the patient. It is a result of changes that have taken place in the organization and delivery of medical care, especially the involvement of governments in all aspects of health care. The traditional one-on-one relationship of physician and patient is now set within a context of government and corporate interests, in which the physician may sometimes assume the status of an employee, that pose considerable challenges to the exercise of the professional values of clinical autonomy and self-regulation. Moreover, while the

responsibility for organizing the delivery of scarce resources has been increasingly transferred from physicians to managers, physicians are still ultimately responsible, both morally and legally, for providing quality care. Although the increasing complexity of health care delivery requires recourse to sophisticated management systems, there is a danger that as physicians become increasingly answerable to or constrained by third parties, their ability to fulfill their commitment to their individual patients can be seriously compromised.

Unprofessional conduct: Some physicians do not uphold the values of the profession. A few put their interests or the interests of third parties ahead of the interests of their patients. The profession needs to meet this challenge by demonstrating its ability to uphold its values and its commitment to doing so. Supporting strong and transparent self-regulatory systems will be a key component of this endeavor.

Commercialism: In recent years the market mentality has expanded its influence to many areas formerly outside its domain, including governments, universities and the professions. Health care has become a major industry, one in which physicians play a central role, and commercial interests, whether private or public, may pressure physicians to compromise their responsibilities to their patients, research subjects and society. The potential for physicians and medical associations to become drawn into conflict-of-interest situations is increasing. Commercialism may compromise both the ethic of care and clinical independence by its reinterpretation of medical care as a commodity and the patient-physician relationship as something less than a fiduciary relationship. There is an inherent opportunity for the profession to address the issue of conflict of interest and to re-affirm its primary obligation and dedication to the patients it cares for.

Consumerism: Physicians strongly support the right of patients to make informed decisions about their medical care. However, the CMA's Code of Ethics requires physicians to recommend only those diagnostic and therapeutic procedures that they consider to be beneficial to the patient or to others. There is a proliferation of health information and advertising in the popular media and on the Internet that may be inaccurate or poorly understood. Taken to its extreme, consumerism can be detrimental not just to professionalism but to the well-being of patients and the interests of society.

Industrialization: This refers to the increased division and specialization of labour in the delivery of health care, whereby the delivery of health care may become fragmented. There is increasing pressure within medicine to improve effi-

ciency and optimize cost savings. While these may be important goals in the broader context of health care, we must ensure that they do not impact negatively on the doctor-patient relationship.

Realizing Opportunities and Dealing with Challenges

Individual physicians should protect, enhance and promote professionalism in medicine by reflecting the values of the medical profession in their practice and by contributing to the efforts of organized medicine to maintain and enhance the ethic of care, clinical autonomy and self-regulation. These efforts require action in 3 areas: policy, education and self-regulation.

Policy: All those involved in health care — physicians, patients, other health care providers, administrators, governments and the general public (as taxpayers, potential patients, relatives of patients, etc.) - should be informed about the values of the medical profession and where it stands on issue related to accountability, clinical autonomy and self-regulation. Policies of medical associations should reflect these values and should speak clearly on topics such as conflict of interest. Policies should be reviewed frequently and updated when necessary, in order to take account of the rapidly changing environment in which medicine is practiced. The topic of professionalism should be granted increasing importance in policy discussions. Policies should be developed and updated in related areas, such as conflict of interest and physician-industry interactions.

In order to be consistent and trustworthy, medical associations should adhere to the same high standards of behaviour that they require of individual physicians. The challenges posed by resource restraints, bureaucratization, unprofessional conduct, commercialism and consumerism are no less serious for associations than for individuals and require sound harmonized policies for both. The CMA has an opportunity for leadership in this regard.

Education: However professional values and policies are established, they must be transmitted to current and future members of the profession in order to have any effect.

Like most other aspects of medical education, the values of professionalism are both taught and modeled. Professionalism should be an essential component of the formal medical curriculum at the undergraduate and postgraduate training levels. Moreover, active demonstration of professionalism such as role modeling by physicians, and in the internal culture of the medical schools and hospitals where

students receive their training, should be used to advantage and challenged when necessary. Likewise for physicians in practice, formal continuing professional development programs and role modeling by other physicians are important for the maintenance of professionalism.

Physicians need to communicate and test their understanding of their professional role with others involved in patient care at numerous levels. Such initiatives, which would engage patients, other professionals and policy-makers, require further development.

The CMA and other medical organizations have taken leadership roles in assisting patients and health care providers in making informed decisions by creating numerous continuing professional development opportunities and readily available clinical information for physicians, effective patient education materials, self-help books and validated Web sites, including www.cma.ca. These efforts need to continue and be strengthened.

Self-regulation: In order to maintain self-regulation in an environment that is increasingly suspicious of such privileges, the medical profession has to demonstrate that self regulation benefits society in general. This requires, among other things, that the medical profession continue to demonstrate its

commitment to the tasks required by self-regulation, including setting and enforcing high standards of behaviour for both individual physicians and medical associations.

Conclusion

Physicians continue to value medical professionalism highly. They believe that it benefits patients greatly and that it should be preserved and enhanced. Professionalism will continue to be based on the relationship of trust between patients and physicians, and the primacy of the physician-patient relationship. It encompasses the values of compassion, beneficence, nonmaleficence, respect for persons and justice. As professionals, physicians will strive to maintain high standards of ethics, clinical practice and education and demonstrate a capacity for social responsibility through self-regulation and accountability (see CMA Policy Statement *The Future of Medicine*).

The CMA welcomes opportunities to engage in dialogue with others as to how professionalism in health care can be preserved and enhanced for the benefit of patients, physicians and society in general.