
Commentary (II)

Continuing Education and True Professionalism

Keeping up with new developments in the field is a sine qua non of professional life. Most of us make the effort in order to maintain our own self-esteem and the respect of our colleagues. True professionals have still another motivation—an innate intellectual curiosity. They study and refine their skills throughout their careers; they teach others; and they innovate and discharge their professional obligations to the limits of their capabilities.

Others, at the opposite end of the spectrum, couldn't care less about keeping current. They are the button pushers. Their principal interests lie outside their chosen field for any number of reasons. They may suffer from burnout, from complicated personal problems, or simply from a lack of intellectual curiosity. They are the ones who fall behind; who fail to discharge their obligations; and whose ineptitude embarrasses colleagues and compromises the care we offer the public. And of course, there are many shades of gray between these two extremes.

Prompted by a desire to maintain consistent quality of health care, certifying organizations and Government regulatory agencies are trying to deal with this problem of professionals who drag their heels over maintaining their professionalism.

What is the best approach to take? Should people be punished for not keeping up? Cajoled or bribed into taking continuing education courses? Periodically tested for relicensure or recertification? Given free lunches to attend noontime educational meetings? Awarded brownie points for attendance that can be converted into the equivalent of merit badges?

The free-lunch, brownie-point approach is the one that the medical and allied health professions have most frequently taken during the past decade or so. Yet despite much debate on the issue, no studies have satisfactorily demonstrated a correlation between continuing education and continued competence. You know the old saying about leading a horse to water. Sure, you can make people sit through a prescribed number of hours of instruction, but you can't guarantee they will learn anything.

Another approach to assuring continued competence is recertification based on passing an exam. Consumer advocacy groups have been very much in favor of this approach; professional organizations have been cool to it. With good reason. Who wants to put his or her own job on the line? Who can be certain that he will pass such an exam? Who, for that matter, wants to put his colleagues on the spot?

Aside from such deterrents, there is a still more perplexing question. Just what determines competence? Who would examine the examiners and certify the certifiers? The National Commission for Health Certifying Agencies is admirable in its intent (see "Who Will Certify the Certifiers? NCHCA Will," MLO, April 1978), but strictly voluntary in reality. Most important, how could any examination assess the essential but intangible quality of judgment?

Exams dwell on familiarity with a body of knowledge; they cannot quantitate something like judgment—and that's what medicine and its related fields are all about. Possessing a body of knowledge is important, of course, but knowing how to apply that knowledge is what separates the neophyte from the professional.

The transition from book-smart neophyte to polished professional comes only with experience, but you can't equate years in the field with excellence of judgment, either. The acid test of professionalism is knowing when you are in over your head and need help from someone more qualified. No exam can be devised to measure that quality, and no amount of experience will confer it.

So where does that leave us? If you concede that the brownie-point system is of questionable value and that periodic recertification exams can measure only one aspect of professionalism, just how do we motivate the professional who isn't self-propelled toward continuing education?

Framed certificates won't do it. Neither will free lunches. More forceful motivators include job satisfaction, professional advancement and higher income potential for developing new skills, and a knowledge that not keeping current can jeopardize one's job security.

Just as effective is interaction with the bright, intelligent, enthusiastic, "true" professional that I described earlier. If you have one of them in your laboratory, you're fortunate indeed.

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Reprinted in its entirety from *Medical Laboratory Observer*, December 1981, pages 21-22; ©1981, Medical Economics Company Inc.