

Professionalism: A case for medical education to honour the societal contract

Jo-Celene De Jongh¹, Nico Nortje²

¹*University of the Western Cape, Bellville, Cape Town, South Africa,* ²*University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa*

Introduction: Medical professionalism is said to be the keystone of the social contract between medicine and society at large. Literature highlights integrity, respect, competence, honesty, trustworthiness and accountability as the features of professionalism. Healthcare students need to be trained in written and unwritten expectations entailing moral commitments, fundamental to both the societal contract and the details of professionalism.

Aim: The aim of the study was to explore occupational therapists and occupational therapy students' understanding as to the concept of professionalism.

Method: The study adopted a descriptive mixed methods approach. Data was collected using a questionnaire consisting of open ended questions where the participants had to elaborate on their understanding of professionalism; rank 12 attributes most cited by literature; and indicate which sphere of interaction influences professionalism the most. A total of 56 occupational therapy students and 55 occupational therapists participated voluntarily in the study. Qualitative data was analysed thematically. For the quantitative data, frequency tables were compiled for both cohorts for the variable combinations: i) Contributors to professionalism; and ii) attributes associated with professionalism. Averages were then calculated to identify the most important aspects.

Results: From the results, three major themes relevant to professionalism were identified and will be presented.

Conclusion: Pertaining to a standardised definition of professionalism, the findings revealed that professionalism did not equate to social standing, wealth production, physique, or appearance, but rather by good behaviour, high values, and positive attitudes seeing the profession as a vocation or calling dedicated to caring for and protecting clients.