

IN THE NEWS

## An Opinion

Issue 77 (2002) of *Academic Medicine, the Journal of the Association of American Medical Colleges*, is a special theme issue on “professionalism”. In a series of articles several authors from the USA as well as from the UK describe their studies, thoughts and experiences with the teaching of professionalism. Especially interesting is the wide variety of viewpoints that can be read, varying from the statement that additional reasons for the decline in interest to become a doctor could be that doctors “no longer command respect and that they are being oppressed by, rather than being guardians of, the health care system” (Cohen) to a classification of the way students experienced and operationalised professionalism: as communicative violations; role resistance; objectification of patients; accountability; physical harm; and “[being caught in] crossfire” (Ginsburg e.a.). A plea is made for the assessment of humanism or professionalism by “connaisseurs”, possessing knowledge, training and experience in the interpersonal aspects of the art of medicine (Misch).

In the same month *Medical Teacher*, Issue 6 (2002), appeared, with articles on “Reflections on the humanities in medical education” (Evans), “Empathy in medical students as related to academic performance, clinical competence and gender” (Hojat e.a.), attitudes of medical students to older people (Wilkinson e.a.) and “Serious, frightening and interesting conditions: differences in values and attitudes between first-year and final-year medical students” (Brorsson e.a.).

This illustrates the point that professionalism, humanities, attitudes and empathy are in the news. Not just the decent conduct of health care professionals with their patients and with each other are the focus here; it is encouraging to witness that more attention is also paid to how the health care professional can learn to cope with the changing demands of the current society and how burn-out can be avoided. The increased recognition of the value of qualitative research may have contributed to this. This development is likely to lead to clever instruments with which we can help the future health care professional, but also their teachers, to give a reliable estimate of the risks they run and how damage can be avoided in these demanding professions.

Although this is a development with which we can be happy, there is also a risk involved. All too often teaching efforts addressing professionalism or humanities have been seen as too soft, and indeed, many have been unsubstantiated by evidence. The field of communication skills training has

worked itself out of this situation by strong research designs, because of which it has now become one of the best founded aspects of skills teaching. It is to be hoped that the field of (teaching) humanities will follow the same course. The area is too important and the potential benefits are too large to allow ourselves to sell hot air!

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