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Letter to the Editor: "The Neurosurgeon and Medical Professionalism During the COVID-19 Pandemic"



LETTER:

Professionalism, as well as ethics, constitutes the foundation of the activity of medicine, which is an intensely moral undertaking. Professionalism acts in society as a structurally stabilizing and morally protective force.¹ The topic of professionalism is frequently mentioned in the medical literature, but the word is hardly defined, as physicians are supposed to understand what it means to be professional and use that understanding to make decisions in both their personal and professional lives.² The concept of professionalism includes 4 fundamental pillars: 1) specialized knowledge, 2) autonomy in decision making, 3) commitment to service to the community, and 4) self-regulation of the activity by peers.^{1,3} In particular, a professional is a person who is located in one of the erudite disciplines and who acts according to the technical, ethical, moral, and deontologic standards of a profession.¹

Professionalism raises a series of commitments within which they highlight commitments to professional skills, honesty, and respect with patients; improvement in the quality of health service delivery; confidentiality; equality in the distribution of resources; and confidence in being free from corrupt practices.³ Neurosurgical professionalism is considered to be part of medical professionalism. Neurosurgery is a vocation in which the constant acquisition of neurosurgical knowledge, neurosurgical technical skills, and neurosurgical practice are mixed and placed at the service of the others.² Neurosurgical professionalism is regularly taught in neurosurgery schools to teach professional values to neurosurgical trainees or residents.^{3,4}

Changes in the current neurosurgical practice have created an atmosphere that can harm neurosurgical professional behavior. Among the problems that challenge or diminish the fundamental elements of neurosurgical professionalism are abuse of power, discrimination, arrogance, distortion, greed, deterioration of the neurosurgeon, lack of moral conscience, breach of responsibility, lack of empathy and integration, conflicts of interest, and inappropriate relationships with other professionals. As a result, neurosurgeons may find increasing obstacles that prevent them from fulfilling their ethical and moral responsibilities toward patients, colleagues, and residents.^{2,3}

We consider it a good time to talk about professionalism, given that medicine has been criticized in recent years for becoming too commercial, depersonalized, and suffering from an increasingly impersonal doctor-patient relationship. In the face of the coronavirus disease (COVID)-19 pandemic, it becomes even more important to rebuild medical professionalism, since it is highly likely that the aforementioned risks are presented and negatively impact the professionalism of the neurosurgeon. In this way, how neurosurgeons react and behave during the COVID-19 pandemic provides an opportunity for teaching immersion in medical professionalism, making abstractions such as commitment, duty, honor, and altruism, which constitute the spirit of professionalism.⁴

COVID-19 provides a unique opportunity to discuss this issue and ask ourselves the following: Why must we care, and to what limits? How can we balance acceptable personal risk with the duty of neurosurgical care? How can we protect the neurosurgical patient's privacy while achieving transparency? How can we best serve patients with neurosurgical serious illnesses to minimize collateral damage during restricted hospital entry times? How can we examine the duty of neurosurgical centers and how do they affect medical professionalism? and other questions to clarify concepts, objectify errors, and propose possible solutions. Online discussion groups and virtual seminars on these topics could help neurosurgery learners gain a fuller and deeper understanding of professionalism and, in the wake of the pandemic, to mature into even more dedicated and competent neurosurgeons.⁴

An ideal way to learn about professionalism in these times is through witnessing and role modeling. It is therefore important to mention that some neurosurgeons have been forced to support specialists in internal medicine, critical care, and pulmonary in the first line of COVID-19 management and treatment, to contain the contagion and increase the capacity of the health system.⁵ The courage and hard work of the doctors on the front line, no matter which department they belong to, deserve the honor of the nickname of hero or heroine. However, while we emphasize professionalism and role modeling, great care must be taken to avoid misuse of the term "heroism," as it could have potentially negative effects. Becoming a hero could be interpreted as omnipotence or superiority and, if at any time the caretakers are unable to meet their expectations, it can cause psychologic disconnection accompanied by disillusionment and anger, which can have negative consequences. Besides, heroism could affect clinical judgment and decision making and mask systemic effects, as it emphasizes individual capabilities rather than teamwork and cooperation.⁴

At the present conjuncture, the acquisition of neurosurgical knowledge properly said is simply not enough. Neurosurgeon and optimal neurosurgical practice in these times also require solid professionalism. Acting with professionalism is a sine qua non condition (in addition to technical ability) for achieving success and is the basis of an ethical and moral framework in neurosurgery.² Therefore it is crucial that schools and neurosurgeons prepare apprentices and residents in neurosurgery to create a professional identity and an understanding of professionalism with the new challenges in medical practice.⁴ The relationship between the patient with a disease and human well-being will continue to be an important point of medical professionalism and more so at a time when the use of new technologies is surpassing us.³ Professionalism is an important piece in the COVID-19 era.

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