

Professionalism, Ethics and Values at Lancaster Medical School

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At Lancaster Medical School (LMS) the concept of professionalism within the medical career is introduced early. The structure of our course contains a module entitled 'Professional Practice, Values and Ethics', which runs alongside our clinical modules each year. The module introduces the basics of legal, moral and ethical responsibilities of a doctor in year one. Our teaching in later years builds upon this. As we gain clinical exposure, we increase our understanding of these principles in practice.

We attend a lecture during our second module of year one that addresses four simple but essential objectives: to understand what professionalism is; why it is important; how it applies to us as current medical students and later throughout our career; and, finally, how to be professional.

One topic covered within this lecture is professionalism with regards to social media. LMS directs us towards various resources that provide guidance on this including: the General Medical Council (GMC) guidance 'Doctors Use of Social Media'.¹ This publication outlines the importance of having an awareness that information posted on social media may be publicly available, meaning posts that are intended for friends and family might instead be accessed by patients and their families. It also highlights that the privacy settings on social media sites cannot guarantee confidentiality. With this knowledge, healthcare professionals can be selective in what aspects of their private life they choose to post online. In addition, the publication focuses on maintaining patient confidentiality when using social platforms. Doctors may communicate with one another via professional social media sites that cannot be accessed by the public. However, when doing so professionals need to be careful that information that may identify patients is not used and patient confidentiality is upheld.

LMS also incorporates the GMC guidance on maintaining a professional boundary with patients into our teaching. This guidance is centred around the trust patients hold for the medical profession and how the behaviours of doctors impact this trust.² The guidance reminds us of the contrast between a patient's vulnerability and a doctor's power. Teaching at LMS emphasises the importance of having an awareness of, and respect for this dynamic. The GMC guidance states: 'you must not use your professional position to pursue a sexual or improper emotional relationship with a patient or someone

close to them'. Maintaining a professional boundary with a patient or former patient may be difficult for some clinicians, for example, general practitioners who work and live in rural areas with close communities. However, the GMC guidance includes information on where to seek advice on these matters when there is uncertainty.

Discussions around drug and alcohol consumption are introduced early at LMS. These discussions enable us to consider how drug and alcohol use may affect performance in both the educational and clinical environment. Working whilst intoxicated would be unacceptable in most workplaces. However, when working in a clinical environment it is crucial that professionals understand how their cognitive state may pose a risk to the safety of their patients and impact the decisions they make.³ LMS introduces this scenario to us during communication skill sessions, during which students can discuss implications of the scenario and ways in which it can be managed. Besides drug and alcohol consumption we practice other situations that may impact a doctor's ability to function, such as lack of sleep, bereavement and personal health issues. Practising these scenarios in simulation helps with recognition of these factors within our colleagues and/or ourselves, along with providing us with an action plan should we encounter this in practice.

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