

Punctuality: A Cornerstone of Professionalism for Medical Students

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Definition and context

Health is a fundamental concern for all human beings, and those entrusted to the care of the sick occupy a crucial role during some of the most vulnerable moments in a person's life. The reliability of healthcare providers is essential, and their timeliness in addressing health concerns can be a matter of life and death. Therefore, for medical professionals, punctuality, defined as the fact of arriving, doing something, or happening at the expected or correct time and not late according to the Cambridge dictionary, is a critical attribute (1). For medical students, who are being trained to become future leaders in healthcare, understanding the importance of punctuality from an early stage is imperative. Punctuality reflects an individual's professionalism, his or her commitment to the given responsibilities and the respect for their colleagues and patients.

At present, there is a tendency to overlook the punctuality of medical students despite its huge significance to the overall health system in the future (2).

Lectures and practical sessions

For the learning process itself timeliness plays an important role (3). The content of medical education is vast and needs to be absorbed at a relatively short time duration. Punctuality allows complete involvement in the learning experience which may involve critical explanations during lectures or at practical demonstrations, which will improve the student's understanding and retention of learned material, ultimately leading to improved academic performance (2). Furthermore, being on time shows respect to the lecturer as well as colleagues whose attention may be interrupted by the tardiness of others.

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This respect for others is of essence for the medical professional as effective teamwork and collaboration will be essential in ensuring the best care for the patients. Altogether, the overall competency of the student will be improved and contribute to their professional development.

At clinical rotations

The attribute of punctuality has been reported to be positively associated with better clinical learning and skill development through increased opportunities to experience patient management, increased exposure to different cases, and active participation in ward activities (2). Seeing allocated patients and being ready to present cases to the consultants will ensure a smooth clinical rotation session which will benefit the student as well as the consultant, other hospital staff members and the colleagues sharing the same clinical rotation.

Punctuality, time management and advantages

Maintaining punctuality and regularity has been reported to be helpful in enhancing time management (2). During the undergraduate period, medical students have ample opportunities to develop leadership skills. The key being punctuality, it keeps the individual focused, realistic, allows appropriate delegation of work and gives an ability to say 'no' without hurting the other party (4). Timeliness will also give the student the advantage of being in control, showing that he/she is organised and dependable while giving others a better impression on themselves (5).

Negative consequences

Poor punctuality will result in missed content, lower grades, inadequate attendance which may lead to penalties such as not being allowed to sit for an exam. Habitual tardiness can lead to a negative reputation as a student leading to strained relationships with colleagues and mentors. Ultimately the most damaging consequence will be as a medical professional when compromised patient care may even cost a life. Furthermore, these future non-punctual physicians will impact patient satisfaction, arouse tension and stress among staff and produce overall negative effects on the health system (6,7). It should be well noted that medical professionals needing disciplinary action by state medical boards have been found to have records of problematic behaviour during medical school (8). This highlights the need for addressing such behaviour at an early stage.

What can be done?

Medical educational institutes and governing bodies of medical education can implement strategies to improve the punctuality of the students such as the establishment of clear guidelines for the expectation of punctuality in the student handbook or code of conduct. Arriving on time and not leaving before the designated time is mentioned in the guidance provided for medical students in the United Kingdom (9). Sri Lanka Medical Council, the statutory body which governs medical professionals in the country, includes punctuality as a virtue to be greatly admired in the guidelines on ethical conduct for medical and dental practitioners (10).

Student delays could be marked on attendance sheets followed by regular review to recognise those with frequent delays. Certain unpredictable events may cause delays such as personal illness, family matters, or transport difficulties (2). Although such delays need an empathetic approach, the students should be encouraged to inform any unanticipated delays to the authorities at least through their colleagues in emergency situations.

“The true professional knows when to be punctual and when, on rare occasion, to abandon it” states Professor McGrouther, going on to explain such situations as needing to spend an unanticipatedly long duration in the surgical theatre during complex trauma cases may result in the clinic patients kept waiting. Regular timeliness will then prove useful as regular patients, and the staff members will attest to the reputation of timeliness of the doctor (4).

While allowing the lateness due to well explained reasons, frequent tardiness should be addressed accordingly. Disciplinary actions may be needed such as verbal warning and the issue of warning letters (2). These will increase the accountability of the students and cultivate a sense of punctuality. Students with habitual tardiness may need to be investigated for any underlying factors which may need to be addressed through counselling (2).

As role models, the teachers are responsible for setting a good example for the students. By consistently being punctual, starting classes on time and adhering to schedules educators can set a standard of professionalism for the students. Formal educational sessions may also

be useful in teaching professionalism to medical students (11). It is important to instil a good professional character to the students in the early years of their education as these practices will be carried into the clinical years and professional career.

It is beneficial that the medical undergraduates are made aware that a student’s life is at a slow stage, but when they become interns/professionals and enter the real demanding world, time and punctuality will bring increased pressure on them (4). A trainee can truly shine with an organisational skill such as punctuality.

As promising young talents who are going to be medical professionals, the students themselves can take measures to improve their time management skills and punctuality. Given that everybody is entrusted with an electronic device such as a smartphone, they themselves can set reminders or alarms, make daily or weekly planners and keep extra few minutes for buffering and reflect on personal routine so that they can understand the causes and delays that keep them being punctual (5).

Conclusion

“PUNCTUALITY IS THE ART OF SHOWING RESPECT, TO YOURSELF AND TO OTHERS. BE ON TIME, AND LET YOUR PRESENCE ILLUMINATE THE PATH TO EXCELLENCE” Anonymous (12).

Punctuality is of utmost importance to the academic and professional development of medical students, as it not only instils discipline and reliability but also equips them with essential time management skills. By

fostering these habits early on, students are better prepared for the time-sensitive nature of clinical practice, where delays can have serious consequences for patient care. Consistently being on time reflects a commitment to professionalism, which is critical in both the educational setting and future medical careers.

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