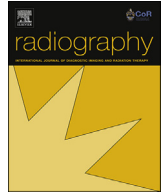




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Perspectives on the development of professionalism as experienced by radiography students

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: This study explores the perspectives of radiography students concerning the concept of professionalism and influence on its development.

Methods: This was a descriptive case study using interpretative phenomenological analysis methodology. Data were gathered from 31 students who participated in a questionnaire consisting of three sections.

Results: The results indicate that the students had an innate understanding of what professionalism is and they also described the main attributes, as highlighted by literature. The results further also indicated that there is a clear differentiation between the influence of the formal and hidden curricula.

Conclusion: This study brings to light the experiences of student radiographers and what they expect would influence their professional development through the course of their training. Since their innate opinions align with international literature there is a need to have this included in formal dialogue.

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Introduction

Professionalism is a concept which can be traced back to the fourth century BCE with the development of the Hippocratic Oath. The oath, although being adapted a few times since its origin, has defined healthcare as a moral enterprise which must be conducted in accordance with a set of guidelines, specifically regarding what would constitute proper behaviour from healthcare workers in their interactions with patients.

Background

It can be argued that oaths like these are no longer applicable in modern healthcare as the patient–healthcare worker relationship has significantly changed from an authoritarian to a more social–cooperative relationship. Likewise it should be noted that healthcare workers today are experiencing many frustrations in the healthcare delivery system as the very nature

and values of medical professionalism are being challenged by external forces.¹ These external forces include, but are not limited to, technological advances where the mere definition of life itself is being challenged, as well as political forces, financial market forces, globalization and patient's rights.¹ There has also been a decline in the level of trust the public generally has in the medical fraternity. In a recent study conducted in the USA, two-thirds of the respondents expressed a lack of confidence in the medical system and healthcare professionalism.²

Professionalism in radiography

Professionalism in radiography is relatively new and limited studies have been conducted on students' perspectives on professionalism. Yelder and Davis³ argue in their analysis of radiographers in the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia that there is a struggle for the profession to get formally recognised, therefore stimulating the debate about professionalism amongst radiographers will address a great need to find a sense of professionalism. The lack of formal recognition by other healthcare professions can partly be attributed to the large amount of knowledge base for radiography which has been developed by other disciplines.⁴

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Education

In order to address the healthcare providers' professionalism and that of the evolving field of radiography, the argument could be levied that healthcare students should be educated in the field of professionalism, since research suggests that educating students about professionalism is very important given society's demands for greater accountability, partnership and better communication.⁵ However, educating students appropriately in assuring professional behaviour has been a challenge as described in literature.⁶ Al-Eraky et al.⁷ are of the opinion that teaching professionalism is not easy as many of the skills and behaviours which are central to professionalism are not innate and need to be developed and behavioural changes need to be encouraged.⁸ Huber⁹ describes a basic theoretical assertion of teaching professionalism in that a student will gain professional competencies in complex application and practice relevant situations. In these situations a student will practice a skill and receive feedback and time to reflect upon the feedback. However, as Huber⁹ elicits, the challenge arises when new experiences cannot be linked to previously existing cognitive systems to use as reference. Therefore, criticism is levied against following only didactic methodology in teaching professionalism (i.e. codes and procedures) and not imparting critical thinking skills to students.

Change in approach

Professionalism training during medical education often tends to be quantified in outcomes-based results.¹⁰ These studies often view the development of professionalism only from that of the educator/policy maker and not necessarily from the viewpoint of the trainee. Given that radiography is a developing field lessons could be taken from approaches in clinical medicine which did not work, such as formal curricula.

The aim of this study is to explore the role players in the scenario, other than the formal educators, and elicit the understanding of how students view professionalism and how they, in an age of informatics, see it develop in the future. The article focuses specifically on these students' perspective to the aspects that are influential in the development and formation of professional behaviour. In addition, the article aims to indicate how one can adapt education curricula to facilitate the effective development of professional behaviour amongst radiography students.

The objectives of this research are the following:

- To investigate an understanding of the concept "professionalism" by undergraduate radiography students;
- To investigate students' perspective on the personal attributes of a professional radiographer;
- To investigate students' perspective of the factors that could facilitate the development of professionalism amongst undergraduate radiography students; and
- To recommend potential educational strategies that can contribute to the facilitation and development of professionalism amongst undergraduate radiography students.

Method

Ethical clearance was granted by a registered REC and the research was consistent in upholding the various internationally recognised guiding principles of informed consent, participation on a voluntary base, anonymity and the right to withdrawal without any adverse consequences. The study's research design is primarily a descriptive case study approach with quantitative and qualitative components. Data collection was conducted by a pen-and-paper questionnaire, set up in two stages.

Sample

Sampling proceeded by means of a non-probability sampling approach, namely convenience sampling. This technique was employed due to the exploratory approach of this study in order to gain insight in undergraduate radiography students' views of the concept professionalism, as well as their view of the contributors and attributes which develop professionalism. The inclusion criteria for the case study were the following: 1) registered undergraduate Radiography students; 2) clinical exposure in a Radiography unit/department/clinic of more than 6 months; 3) University-level English reading and writing competency (the questionnaire was only available in English). A total of 31 students volunteered and completed the questionnaire during one data collection session. Although the data collected from such a small conveniently selected group cannot be generalised to the population as a whole, the rationale is that to discover the meaning about an under-researched subject in the field and that generalisability was not the main aim of this study.

Procedure

The first section consisted of an open-ended item in which the respondents were requested to indicate their understanding of the concept "professionalism". This question was loosely structured to ensure the respondents had the freedom to give a variety of responses, which enabled the researchers to get richer data. Only upon completion of the first section could the respondents get access to the second part of the study to ensure their opinions were not influenced or contaminated by the data extracted from literature.

The second section consisted of more structured questions. The researchers did a basic scoping exercise and identified the 12 most prevalent attributes of professionalism and the five most likely influencers to a student's professional development listed in literature pertaining to professional development in healthcare curricula at large.^{1,5,7,11–18} These attributes and influencers were given to the students to rank according to importance. In the first item the respondents were required to rank the six most important attributes associated with the concept "professional" from a list of 12 statements (1 = most important attribute, 2 = 2nd most important attribute, and so forth). In the second item the respondents were required to select and rank statements regarding the factors that contributed to their professional demeanour (five statements; 1 = most important factor, 5 = least important factor).

Analysis

The qualitative responses in the open-ended item were analysed by means of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to identify the emergent themes.¹⁹ IPA requires that the researcher identifies his/her own opinion of the research question and cognisant of this starts to codify the data collected in significant detail to give expression of what the phenomenon of professionalism means to the participants. Major themes are identified and each major theme is again broken down into smaller themes until a recurring theme emerges from the data. IPA is seen as a "bottom-up" approach where codes are generated rather than evaluated against pre-existing codes. Since there were two researchers involved in this study, both did an independent IPA analysis and the results were combined and are presented below.

The quantitative side of the study was basic frequency distribution by virtue of rank-ordered data for the two items in section 2 of the questionnaire. The data was respectively inversely transformed to numerical values for the sake of determining the overall

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