



SPANISH ASSOCIATION OF PAEDIATRICS

## Solid paediatricians in liquid times: Reviving professionalism<sup>☆</sup>



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**Abstract** Professionalism is rarely taught formally. It is learned by osmosis through the hidden curriculum: a set of attitudes that each one of us transmits unconsciously to students, medical residents, and colleagues. All of us are a model or counter-model of professionalism through a series of values that have been the pillars of our profession since Hippocrates. Values that do not seem to be strong enough to pass our time.

There are specific factors of the 21st century such as the financial crisis, the highly technical nature of medicine, bureaucratisation or trivialisation of the medical process that could explain, but not justify, the decline in the values of our profession: Empathy, integrity, solidarity, the altruism, or confidentiality.

That is why, from the Bioethics Committee of the Spanish Paediatrics Association we establish the need to revive professionalism. Building and maintaining the values of our profession by training scientifically competent paediatricians, as well as being excellent from an ethical point of view, is part of our responsibility.

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### PALABRAS CLAVE

Bioética;  
Ética;  
Pediatría;  
Profesionalidad

**Pediatras sólidos en tiempos líquidos. Reanimando la profesionalidad**

**Resumen** La profesionalidad apenas se enseña formalmente. Se aprende por ósmosis a través del *currículum oculto*: conjunto de actitudes que cada uno de nosotros transmite de forma inconsciente a estudiantes, residentes y compañeros. Todos somos modelo o contramodelo de

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profesionalidad a través de una serie de valores que han constituido los pilares de nuestra profesión desde Hipócrates. Valores que parecen soportar mal el paso del tiempo.

Existen factores propios del siglo *xxi* como la crisis económica, el excesivo tecnicismo, la burocratización o la banalización del acto médico que pueden explicar, pero nunca justificar, el declive de los valores de nuestra profesión: la empatía, la integridad, la solidaridad, el altruismo o la confidencialidad.

Por eso, desde el Comité de Bioética de la Asociación Española de Pediatría planteamos la necesidad de reanimar la profesionalidad. Construir y mantener los valores de nuestra profesión formando pediatras científicamente competentes, pero también excelentes desde el punto de vista ético, es parte de nuestra responsabilidad.

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## Introduction

Professionalism is suffering, it does not withstand the passage of time well. It is going through a silent crisis that is structurally associated with the liberal professional model, which has excessively neutral values, and the model of society that we are all contributing to, in which many values (human, professional, social) that used to be solid and stable are becoming liquid and unstable.<sup>1</sup>

Today, when we try to visualise a good professional, the first thing that comes to mind is technical and scientific prowess, the ability to make brilliant diagnoses, to put novel therapies in practise, to perform complex surgeries or procedures. We do not think of the virtuous professional, committed and responsible in the performance of his role.<sup>2</sup> However, an occupation is different from a profession in its moral characteristics,<sup>3</sup> and it is possible to be wholly devoid of moral character and be a good technician, but not a good doctor.

On the other hand, we are alarmed to see that ethical aspects of medicine (the doctor-patient relationship, integrity, responsibility, empathy) are becoming less appealing when it comes to publishing, promoting a course or organising a roundtable at a congress compared to scientific or technical subjects. We have partly lost our *vocation*, the inner drive to fulfil an important destiny of our own choosing, as opposed to one imposed on us. We no longer seek *excellence* as a *virtue*, which, far from being a moralistic notion, means the complete fulfilment of our choice; if the virtuous violinist is the one who makes the violin sound good, then the virtuous doctor is the one that develops the qualities pertinent to the profession: benevolence, sincerity, respect, integrity, compassion, empathy, honesty. It seems clear that there is no general interest in *ethics*, and that they are considered a peripheral and incidental subject. For all the above reasons, we are compelled to think that professional ethics or professionalism, whose core continues to consist of timeless elements, is in need of resuscitation, if only basic.

The concepts of *vocation*, *excellence*, *virtue* and *ethics* are barely taught in formal education, but they are learned by osmosis through the *hidden curriculum*: the

set of attitudes that is transmitted by any professional, whether a mediocre one, a true master or a thoroughly toxic individual<sup>4</sup> (the kind that displays behaviours that go against professionalism, or whose words and actions do not match). The *hidden curriculum* shapes the environment positively or negatively, so that, whether we like it or not, each of us becomes a role model of professional or unprofessional conduct. This is a huge responsibility!

Professionalism involves the combination of three elements: the health care professional, the patient and the institution. However, in this article we will focus almost solely on the professional, as ethics are philosophy in practice and must be applicable to our practice. In this sense, we can develop, teach and promote professionalism with zero costs. To *resuscitate*, or, to put it another way, to *re-animate* our devalued medicine, to halt the demotivation cultivated by administrators and to flee from our own corruption is largely up to us. However, getting entrenched in sterile complaints about inexistent idealised patients or utopian institutional improvements that will never come to be (and do not depend on us) brings people together and causes indignation, but does not promote change. Indulging in victimhood is infantile, indolent and cruel because it usurps the position of true victims.<sup>5</sup>

## A basic history of professionalism

We have existed as a profession from the times of Hippocrates (v century B.C.), to which the Hippocratic oath has been attributed, a fundamental text in Western ethics that provides a code of conduct in pursuit of the best interests of the patient as well as the good reputation of the physician and the profession. The Oath remains an ethical and deontological standard today, as rather than being a mere contract, it establishes a *bond* that entails the moral obligation to devote one's life to the service of humanity. It postulates an ethics of the duty as a physician that goes beyond patient rights, and upholds a central tenet: health care professionals can aspire to nothing less than excellence, as any lesser aspiration must be considered insufficient.<sup>3</sup> In the same period, Confucius (v century B.C.) stated that medicine is an art,

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