

## LETTER TO EDITOR

# The COVID-19 pandemic: a live class on medical professionalism

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The COVID-19 pandemic has had a tremendous impact on medical students. Recently, Newcastle University Medical School conducted its first-ever online graduation ceremony, which received over 37 000 views.<sup>1</sup> It is an answer to the UK government's call, the MBBS class of 2020 from several medical schools in the UK have sped up their graduation process and moved into clinical practice to support NHS in the battle against COVID-19.

This healthcare crisis has forced medical students out of classrooms and clinical rotations in many countries. Although some courses have been conducted in an online format in efforts to minimize disruption, this has not completely mitigated all impact of COVID-19 on medical education, which encompasses not only knowledge but also the 'hidden curriculum' from real-world clinical experience. One of the most important hidden skills is professionalism, which is defined as the physician's commitment to the welfare of patients above his own and efforts to improve healthcare for the welfare of society.<sup>2</sup> Courses on medical professionalism are regularly taught in medical schools to teach professional values. Nevertheless, the best way to learn about professionalism is through witnessing and role modeling. How medical professionals react and behave to the COVID-19 pandemic provides an opportunity for immersion teaching on medical professionalism, realizing abstractions like altruism, commitment, duty and honor, which compose the spirit of professionalism. It might be more educational than online medical lectures that knowing retired medical professionals in Italy, the USA and other countries, have volunteered to return to cope with the dramatic increase in COVID-19-infected patients.

It is a good time to discuss professionalism. Medicine has been criticized for becoming too commercialized, depersonalized and suffering from tenuous doctor-patient relationships over recent years.<sup>3</sup> In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, rebuilding medical professionalism becomes even more important to

restore confidence in physicians and medical students and increase our cohesion. As with SARS in 2003, COVID-19 provides a timely opportunity for this conversation, such as why we have a duty to care and to what limits;<sup>4</sup> how to balance acceptable personal risk with the duty to care; how to protect patient privacy while achieving transparency; how can we better serve patients with severe diseases to minimize collateral damage during times of restricted entry to hospitals; and examining the duty of institutions and how they affect medical professionalism. Webinars and online discussion groups about such issues might help students gain a more thorough and profound understanding about professionalism and, through the pandemic, mature into even more competent and devoted physicians.

The early graduation of the MBBS class of 2020 in the UK has the power of role-modeling, which needs to be valued. By observing and following excellent role models, medical students inherit values from their educators and build their own professionalism.<sup>5</sup> This 'implicit' learning often exerts a subtle yet more profound influence than 'explicit' learning. For example, many senior specialists are now working in intensive care units to provide care to COVID-19 patients. Professors and experts are fighting at the front line with young residents. Both observe the patient's condition at the bedside and perform invasive procedures like intubation together. These are just some of the moments when senior physicians role model their commitment to medical students. It may be a pity if many medical students were completely removed from schools or not-the-frontline hospitals for fear of spreading the virus, which would emphasize concerns about personal safety rather than duty to care.

While emphasizing professionalism and role-modeling, we should be cautious to avoid misuse of the term 'heroism'. The courage and hard work of healthcare workers on the front line,

no matter where they are from, deserve the honor of the moniker hero or heroine. In China's fight against the epidemic, many physicians received publicity as heroes which, while playing an important role in reassuring the population and boosting the morale of frontline healthcare workers, could have potential negative effects. Becoming a hero could be interpreted as omnipotency and, once you cannot meet your expectations, there may be a psychological disconnect accompanied by anger and disappointment, which can be harmful. Moreover, heroism emphasizes individual capabilities rather than teamwork and cooperation, which might affect clinical judgement and decision-making as well as mask systemic defects. Thus, it is crucial to equip our medical students with professional identity and an understanding of professionalism. We must bear in mind that medicine does not rely on heroism but humanity, which calls for integrity, honesty, compassion and empathy in every medical professional.

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