

# Role Models of Professionalism:

## Who they are, what they think and how they influence medical students

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### Background

Transitioning from a medical student to a doctor requires not only the requisite scientific knowledge and clinical skills, but also the desired values, attitude and professional character.<sup>1</sup> Role modeling is a key modality through which this is learned.<sup>2,3</sup> How role models are perceived by their students and the attributes which they imbue in their teaching have been described in final year medical students<sup>4,5</sup> but the relationship between these and the views and intentions of role models themselves has not been explored. The aim of this study is to explore how student-identified role models conceptualize their own professionalism and how it compares with the perceptions of their students.

### Methods

This was a mixed method study which used both quantitative and qualitative methods.

#### (1) Questionnaire survey

All third (n=160) and final (n=120) year medical students at HKU LKS Faculty of Medicine in the academic year of 2012–13 were invited to join the study. Participants completed a questionnaire which asked them to: identify a teacher whom they considered to be a role model of professionalism, describe why the teacher was a role model, and indicate how the teacher has affected their values, attitudes, behavior, or character. Questionnaire responses were analyzed with descriptive statistics, and open-text content was analyzed thematically.

#### (2) Individual interviews

The 5 most frequently cited teachers in the initial student questionnaire survey and 9 other cited teachers, purposively selected to maximize diversity of opinion, participated in individual semi-structured interviews from Feb-May 2013. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were independently coded by 2 researchers, and differences were resolved by consensus. Interviews continued until there was saturation of themes.

### Results

118 students (64% male) participated in the questionnaire survey, with a response rate of 39% (31% in Year 3; 69% in Year 5). From the questionnaire survey, over 50 teachers were identified as role models of professionalism. 14 teachers were interviewed. Characteristics of professionalism described by both students and teachers were categorized into 3 domains: **(1) Teacher-related** (interaction with students); **(2) Physician-related** (interaction with patients and colleagues, medical knowledge); and **(3) Person-related** (personal attributes). Within these domains, some key differences surfaced with students describing that teachers' professional impact was felt through their strictness, their personal sharing, and their interaction with colleagues but not necessarily through their friendliness.

#### Teacher-related

##### Similarities

###### Having good content knowledge and teaching skills

- "...the student thought that I am **knowledgeable**, so all the questions raised by them can be answered to their satisfaction. Usually this is because I usually tend to be **well prepared** before for each teaching session." (Teacher 5)
- "...**contents well taught and organized**..." (3rd Year Student 15)

###### Dedication to teaching

- "... I spend a lot of extra time to teach them... after seeing the patient, I ask them to go and sit outside the ward. And then, we sit down and discuss about the patient problem... I usually, for example, **give extra lectures just before the final year examination to show them how to examine the physical signs**." (Teacher 6)
- "...**pays careful attention to the needs of each student**..." (3rd Year Student 20)

##### Differences

###### Strict

- "**Highly demanding** for students' knowledge and professional attitude, while practically giving direction about how we can achieve that. **Stressful learning but really good**." (5th Year Student 21)

###### Personal sharing

- "**Share with us his views on being a good doctor, and what motivated him to become a good doctor. Really inspiring**." (5th Year Student 30)

#### Physician-related

##### Similarities

###### Doctor-patient relationship, clinical interpersonal skills

- "**They sometimes appreciated that the way I communicated with the patients that when I sort of took them to the bedside teaching, I've been polite and considerate and sort of gentle to the patients**." (Teacher 8)
- "...**demonstrated incredible patience and an eye to detail... readily explained everything to the patient to keep him informed and was careful to prevent unnecessary discomfort**" (3rd Year Student 26)

###### Clinical competence and expertise

- "When I'm seeing new patient they might like the way that I **derive correct diagnosis quite rapidly**... that may be part of the clinical skill." (Teacher 6)
- "...**immense interest in knowledge, efficient thinking skills and processes**" (5th Year Student 48)

##### Differences

###### Interaction with colleagues

- "**He took the effort and time to discuss with the patient the possible management plans, and he negotiated with other doctors for trying novel treatments**." (5th Year Student 45)
- "**He... has good relationship with other staff like nurses**." (5th Year Student 74)

#### Person-related

##### Similarities

###### Enthusiasm in teaching and practice

- "**Personally there is one point real is that I'm doing my job here still at this age and stage of my life is because I find Medicine interesting...I enjoy it and I think that my students probably can feel that I enjoy this work**." (Teacher 14)
- "**Enthusiastic about teaching and medicine (arranging sessions to teach medical students)**." (5th Year Student 25)

###### Humanistic, confident, attitude to patients and students, punctual

- "**I am courteous to them, you know... I dress nicely, even for a lecture. I would not go to a lecture in jeans or t-shirt. I think student wants that**." (Teacher 1)
- "**When the bedside teaching is done, then [I] usually greet the patient, and also request the student to greet the patient as well, and... try to make them know this is so called professionalism, and this is also the attitude to the patient**." (Teacher 5)
- "**He reminds me the attitudes towards patients and to be humble**." (5th Year Student 7)

##### Differences

###### Friendly

- "...**being approachable, understand the perspective of students, being friendly**" (Teacher 2)
- "**I am friendly... I suppose for some over the years, I have kept in touch (with students)... and they knocked on my door, just say hello. I have got chocolates in my room, and we share chocolates... or things like that. So in that way I am friendly**." (Teacher 3)

### Discussion

Findings of our study were similar to past studies done in Western countries on house staff which identified such attributes as dedicating additional time in teaching, addressing importance of doctor-patient relationship, and enthusiasm in teaching.<sup>5,6,7</sup> Discrepancy appeared mostly on the expectation of the students about the role of a medical teacher. While teachers are expected to be friendly and approachable in Western countries<sup>6,7</sup>, students in our study saw teachers as a higher authority perhaps due to Confucian belief<sup>8,9</sup>, and hence had no expectation for them to be friendly and even appreciated them for being strict.

### References

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### Conclusion

Teachers are perceived as role models of professionalism in their capacity as a teacher, a physician, or a person. There are differences between teachers and students in the perception of some attributes within a role due to cultural considerations. Nonetheless, role modeling is reaffirmed as a powerful tool in shaping student perception of professionalism. Teachers can be made aware of the extent of their influence in order to facilitate role modeling behavior.

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