

The Root of Unprofessionalism

Dear Editor,

The editorial written by Caroline CPong and Nigel CK Tan published in the November 2014 issue on professionalism of doctors and how to counter unprofessionalism, directs our attention to an aspect which we tend to overlook.

Many laymen think that doctors still take the Hippocratic Oath on graduation and are therefore bound for life to professionalism and ethics. I feel that even if we have taken the outdated oath or a modern version of the oath, it would not make any difference to our behaviour because it would have come too late to have any influence.

In attempts to instill professionalism and ethics in doctors, I believe that the law of diminishing returns applies. In other words, the success of altering personal behaviour diminishes progressively as the student becomes a junior doctor and advances to a senior position. Childhood and early youth are the periods when one is most susceptible to the influence of teaching, indoctrination or brainwashing, or whatever we choose to call it. Doctors are not any different from members of any other profession or occupation in psychological makeup.

The Chinese sage Confucius believed that men were born benign and innocent but needed to be guided to the right path in order not to go wayward. Thus, the classic 'Three-worded Jing', a compulsory study for all Chinese schoolchildren from the Song dynasty to the late Qing dynasty, began with these opening remarks:

Men are born good and similar in nature.
They become different by influence of nurture.
Men's nature goes wayward with neglect of teaching.
Full attention is needed for proper upbringing.
Jade that is not carved does not rate as jewellery.
Man who is unlearned is ignorant of morality.

Some 200 years after Confucius, Xun Zi, an outstanding Confucian scholar, disagreed with the Old Master. He was known for his opinion that men were born bad, and that

the character needed to be moulded by teaching in order to become good and benevolent. He was among the first to emphasise the importance of childhood upbringing. His views led to the emergence of the Chinese legalist school.

For admission to the medical school, we can only select adult students by their scholastic records and not by their earlier upbringing. It is difficult to modify the character once it is formed. The multifaceted approach of cultivating professionalism put forth by Dr Ong and Dr Tan in the editorial is valid and important. However, I am pessimistic that it may be of limited effectuality at such a late stage.

There are 3 ways to make a person conform to generally accepted social norms—teaching and indoctrination from young, instilling fear of supernatural beings, and enforcement of strict law, or a combination of all 3. It is rare to see an unprofessional doctor mend his way willingly. It is sad and unfortunate that our medical profession may have to rely increasingly on rule enforcement.

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