Reply from Author: Missing the Forest for the Trees

We thank Dr Ong Siew Chey for his sincere comments. He opines that professional behaviour is a reflection of an innate character trait, that behaviour is shaped early and is difficult to modify later, and that there are 3 ways of making doctors conform to professional norms. We would like to reframe the issue as this traditional view oversimplifies and limits the appreciation of the complex problem of professionalism.

Firstly, the pessimistic notion that ethical/moral behaviours are hard to change with increasing seniority is fortunately refuted by evidence. Advances in moral reasoning increase with age throughout a person’s lifespan, and this progression in adulthood is correlated with education.1

Secondly, even though character traits do influence professional behaviour, these traits are but one of several factors influencing professionalism when we take a systems perspective.2,3 Organisational culture is another component of the system influencing professional behaviours.3 In psychology, the phenomenon of “moral elevation” describes how others are motivated to behave ethically when they see others doing likewise.4 Regardless of a person’s traits, an institutional culture of ethical behaviour is another system component that can promote professional behaviour in both senior and junior doctors.

Finally, there is evidence that professionalism can be shaped and improved. Dr Ong feels that reciting the Hippocratic Oath or the modern physicians’ pledge does not change professional behaviour. The pledge is an example of a moral reminder. Experimental psychology studies have shown that such moral reminders do alter ethical behaviour by reducing cheating during tests.5 Within the field of medicine, a recent randomised trial at the Mayo clinic6 demonstrated that it was possible to promote professionalism using a targeted intervention. Notably, the participants were already qualified specialists, showing that seniority was not an impediment to improving professionalism.

These are just some examples of how elements within our system can be used to improve professionalism. By taking a systems viewpoint,7 instead of focusing on fixed character traits, we see the forest, not just the trees. Extant evidence1,4-6 provides grounds for hope; we remain optimistic that professional behaviours can be shaped using a multifaceted systems approach.

REFERENCES

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