

# Professionalism

## Professionalism and Protocols for Handling Lapses

Professionalism in medicine is essential for medical students, physicians and all members of the health care team. *Professionalism* is broader than just “ethical behavior” or “personal comportment.” It includes a larger overarching “construct” that includes other elements. However, central to any construct of professionalism are responsibility, integrity and respect for others. WCM expects that its students, faculty, staff and administrators will foster an environment characterized by professionalism at all times in all settings.

The Weill Cornell Medical College Program in Medical Education has two core competencies with constituent learning objectives that comprise the construct of professionalism:

### Professionalism (P)

- P-1. Maintain a professional comportment, while demonstrating responsibility, integrity, empathy, reliability, and attention to personal wellness.
- P-2. Demonstrate the ethical principles that govern the doctor-patient relationship, medical decision-making, and healthcare delivery.
- P-3. Provide compassionate, unbiased care to patients from diverse backgrounds.

### Interpersonal and Communication Skills (ICS)

- ICS-1. Communicate with patients and their families, counsel them in an effective, caring, and culturally competent manner.
- ICS-2. Communicate, consult, collaborate, and work effectively as a member or leader of healthcare teams.

For purposes of assessment, WCMC defines professionalism as demonstrated competency in the following four domains that derive from the learning objectives:

- Responsibility, Integrity and Ethics
- Self-improvement
- Relationships with patients
- Relationships with the healthcare team and systems

These domains can be further parsed into the attributes that students are expected to demonstrate as part of each domain in all settings\*.

*Responsibility* includes such attributes as attendance at required classes and clinical encounters; reliable and timely performance of educational and clinical responsibilities, including completion of required course evaluations and health screening surveys and requirements; accurate, honest reporting of information; adhering to all medical college policies and personal comportment that includes proper dress, grooming, hygiene and ethical, emotionally-modulated conduct.

*Self-Improvement* includes the ability to accept constructive criticism and modifying behavior appropriately.

*Relationships with patients* includes a sensitivity to patient needs and perspectives that is a cornerstone for building rapport, patient advocacy (including putting the patient's needs above one's own) and maintenance of confidentiality and decorum.

*Relationships with colleagues, the health care team and systems* include respect for and cooperation with colleagues from different health care professions and the appropriate use of medical records and the internet.

## **Professional Codes Students Are Expected to Follow**

Students are also expected to follow a number of policies that set the standards for professionalism in various settings that students pass through during the medical education program. Students should familiarize themselves with these policies as described below.

### Classroom and Learning Environments

- Academic Policies (see relevant section of Student Handbook)
- The Standards of Conduct (see relevant section of Student Handbook)
- [The Teaching-Learning Environment and Student Mistreatment](#) Policy (see relevant section of Student Handbook)
- [Technical Standards](#) (see relevant section of Student Handbook)

### Patient Settings

- HIPAA regulations governing confidentiality of patient information (see relevant section of Student Handbook)
- [The NewYork-Presbyterian Credo](#)

### Research Settings

- The Standards of Conduct (see relevant section of Student Handbook)
- Research Integrity information (see relevant section of Student Handbook)

### Internet and Patient/Research Data

- [Policies governing the use of information technologies](#)

Students are expected to adhere to any new policies of the medical college that are designed to address new situations or circumstances, e.g., public health emergencies such as COVID or safety concerns such as political unrest or criminal activity.

## Assessing Professionalism

WCMC expects that all medical students will demonstrate professional behavior in all four domains at all times. The faculty will evaluate student professionalism in each of the four domains at every course assessment, as pertinent to the course goals and objectives. The faculty who are typically in the best position to evaluate professionalism are those who work closely with students in small group or preceptor sessions in the foundational years, in health care teams during the clerkships and as mentors on research projects during the AOC. There are specific sections on many rating forms in each required course where faculty are asked to assess a student's professionalism either by rating, narrative comments or both. In addition, faculty and residents are also asked four 'screening' questions about a student's professionalism based on the four domains described above. These questions are designed to identify any lapses in professionalism as defined below.

*Did the student demonstrate professional and ethical behavior, as defined below, at all times?*

**Y = Yes**      **N = No**      **U = Unable to Assess**

- |   |              |
|---|--------------|
| • <i>Responsibility: attendance, reliability, reporting, personal comportment</i>     | <b>Y/N/U</b> |
| • <i>Self-improvement: accepting constructive criticism</i>                           | <b>Y/N/U</b> |
| • <i>Relationships with patients: rapport, sensitivity, advocacy, confidentiality</i> | <b>Y/N/U</b> |
| • <i>Relationships with colleagues, the healthcare team and systems</i>               | <b>Y/N/U</b> |

## Identifying Lapses in Professionalism

A lapse in professionalism is defined as:

- A breach of professional conduct; OR
- Insufficient demonstration of professional attributes

*Breaches* typically refer to a student's failure to adhere to policies that govern professional standards as describes above (e.g., academic policies in the Student Handbook or the "Honor Code", HIPAA etc.)

*Insufficient demonstration of professional attributes* is typically noted on faculty or resident rating forms and indicates that a student has not met a competency standard for medical education program learning objectives ("Professionalism" and "Interpersonal and Communication Skills")

A lapse in professionalism might be observed or suspected by anyone in the WCMC community. This could include a faculty member, resident, staff, administrator, other health professional, patient, or fellow student. Likewise, a lapse may occur in classroom, clinical, research or social settings, including the use of the internet.

While any single incident may have greater or lesser importance, WCMC also identifies four levels of lapses in professionalism, with increasing degrees of significance:

- Isolated incident
- Pattern of incidents
- Continued pattern of incidents despite specific intervention
- Continued pattern of incidents; unable to correct behavior reliably

### **Protocols for Student with an Observed or Suspected Lapse in Professionalism**

#### **A. If a lapse is observed or suspected within a course:**

1. The course director assesses the incident
2. If initial assessment suggests that a lapse may have occurred, the course director meets with the student
3. If after meeting with a student the course director confirms a lapse in professionalism has occurred, the course director completes a “Professionalism Evaluation Report (PR)” (see below)
4. The course director plans remedial action. This could include:
  - a. Monitoring the student’s future behavior more closely
  - b. Input into the student’s course assessment and grade

*\*Note that a single egregious instance of unprofessionalism or an unremediated pattern of unprofessionalism are grounds for a non-passing (“Marginal or “Fail”) grade, and, if severe may be grounds for dismissal from the Medical College. When remediating a grade of “Marginal” or “Fail” due to professionalism issues, additional professionalism issues are grounds for a non-passing (“Marginal” or “Fail”) grade.*

  - c. Direct observation of the student
  - d. Standardized patient assessment
  - e. Requiring a written reflection essay or literature review
  - f. Assignment to a faculty coach
  - g. Referring the student to the pertinent Student Evaluation Committee
    - i. Essential Principles of Medicine SEC
    - ii. Health, Illness and Disease 1 SEC
    - iii. Health, Illness and Disease 2 SEC
    - iv. Clerkship and Post-Clerkship SEC
  - h. Referring the student to the Associate Dean, Education or the Senior Associate Dean (Education)
  - i. Referring the student to medical or mental health services
5. The completed form is submitted to the Office of Academic Affairs.

See other sections for more description of the protocol for lapses in attendance, and for unexcused late submission of assignments.

#### **B. If a lapse is observed or suspected outside a course:**

1. The relevant Education Dean\* assesses the incident
2. If initial assessment suggests that a lapse may have occurred, the Education Dean may meet with the student.

3. Not all lapses will result in student-Dean meetings. For example, failure to complete routine compliance requirements in a timely manner (e.g., course evaluations, Student Health Screens) may result in automatic Professionalism Reports.
4. If a lapse has occurred, the Education Dean completes a “Professionalism Evaluation Report” (see below)
5. The Education Dean plans remedial action. This could include:
  - a. Monitoring the student’s future behavior more closely
  - b. Direct observation of the student
  - c. Standardized patient assessment
  - d. Requiring a written reflection essay or literature review
  - e. Assignment to a faculty coach
  - f. Referring the student to the pertinent Student Evaluation Committee
    - i. Semester 1: Essential Principles of Medicine SEC
    - ii. Semester 2: Health, Illness and Disease 1 SEC
    - iii. Semester 3: Health, Illness and Disease 2 SEC
    - iv. All other: Clerkship and Post-Clerkship SEC
  - g. Referring the student to the Associate Dean, Education or the Senior Associate Dean (Education)
  - h. Referring the student to medical or mental health services
6. The completed form is submitted to the registrar.

\*Education Deans include Deans for Academic and Student Affairs and Student Life/Diversity, Curriculum, and Admissions.

Professionalism reports are based on observations made by faculty or staff and confirmed by the relevant course director or education dean. As such, they are not subject to an appeal process. Once a course director or education dean decides to file a PR during his or her meeting with the student, the student is permitted to write comments about the incident or describe what he or she believe to be mitigating circumstances. PRs become part of a student’s official academic record and are reviewed by the Student Evaluation Committee (SEC) and Promotions and Graduation (P&G) Committees. An accumulation of PRs for recurring lapses in professionalism or an egregious incident of unprofessional behavior may result in a notation in the student’s Medical School Performance Evaluation (MSPE, aka “Dean’s Letter”).

## **Professionalism Evaluation Report (PR) (Course)**

**Student name**

**Course**

**Course Director**

**Date**

We have found that the student has not demonstrated competency in the element(s) of professionalism indicated below.

1. Responsibility, Integrity and Ethics

- Attendance at required classes and clinical encounters
- Reliable, timely performance of educational and clinical responsibilities
- Accurate, honest reporting of information
- Personal comportment: dress, grooming, hygiene, conduct

2. Self-improvement

- Accepting constructive criticism
- Modifying behaviors appropriately

3. Relationships with patients

- Establishing rapport
- Sensitivity to patient needs and perspectives
- Advocacy
- Confidentiality and decorum

4. Relationships with colleagues, the healthcare team and systems

- Respect for, and cooperation with, all colleagues
- Appropriate use of medical records

**Comments (required)**

**Remedial Action**

**Student Comments (optional)**

**I have read this evaluation and discussed it with the course director**

**Student signature**

**Date**

**Course Director signature**

**Date**

## **Professionalism Evaluation Report (Outside a Course)**

**Student name**

**Date**

We have found that the student has not demonstrated competency in the element(s) of professionalism indicated below.

1. Responsibility, Integrity and Ethics
  - Attendance at required session(s)
  - Reliable, timely performance of educational and clinical responsibilities
  - Accurate, honest reporting of information
  - Personal comportment: dress, grooming, hygiene, conduct
2. Self-improvement
  - Accepting constructive criticism
  - Modifying behaviors appropriately
3. Relationships with patients
  - Establishing rapport
  - Sensitivity to patient needs and perspectives
  - Advocacy
  - Confidentiality and decorum
5. Relationships with colleagues, the healthcare team and systems
  - Respect for, and cooperation with, all colleagues
  - Appropriate use of medical records

**Comments (required)**

**Remedial Action**

**Student Comments (optional)**



**I have read this evaluation and discussed it with the Associate Dean for Student Affairs**

**Student signature**

**Date**

**Education Dean signature**

**Date**