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Spotlight on Professionalism

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Professionalism continues to be a hot topic at medical education conferences internationally, and the 2004 AMEE meeting was no exception. There were 23 short communication and poster presentations and one major symposium on professionalism in addition to presentations that touched on aspects of professionalism in portfolio assessment, multi-professional education, outcomes, standard-setting, curriculum development, and even international medical education. The research and discussions at the meeting focused on three issues: the definition of professionalism, measuring professionalism, and teaching professionalism.

Conference participants realized that a very broad definition of professionalism ends up as an overall definition of physician competence, so some limits and specification of the definition were discussed and debated at the meeting. Knowledge and communication skills may be necessary for professionalism, but are separate enough domains to be considered related but not to be included in a definition of professionalism. Other areas of professionalism discussed include altruism, humanism, accountability, empathy, self-education, and others.

In the context of measuring professionalism, conference participants saw a wide array of the new and developing instruments being evaluated for professionalism assessment including ethnography, self assessment, peer assessment, faculty observations, portfolio assessment, and institutional surveys. Each of these has their own unique strengths and weaknesses, and any full institutional assessment of professionalism is likely to include many of these methods.

Among the most exciting developments in professionalism are the descriptions of programs and issues around teaching professionalism. As one keynote speaker remarked, our faculty often reject the teaching of professionalism because they believe it "can't be taught," that students are "born with it," or that you can't "teach it formally." In contrast to these remarks, there were numerous interesting curricula for professionalism and ethics presented as short communications, posters, and in the symposium session. A central problem noted by all is the clear need for further work in faculty development to educate our colleagues on the definition of professionalism, ways to teach it, and ways to document it in our peers and our students.

Further questions stimulated by the presentations this year included:

- How can we overcome the resistance to teaching professionalism?
- How do we know that the professionalism curricula are working?
- What will a reliable and valid set of professionalism assessments look like?
- Does ensuring professional behavior ensure professionalism?

For the answers – come to next year's meeting where there is sure to be more exciting work on professionalism in medicine!