

Uncovering the hidden curriculum: a qualitative analysis of professionalism in surgical clerkship

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Background: During clerkship, professional values and behaviours are commonly shaped on the job, where clerks face an array of informal experiential lessons commonly referred to as ‘the hidden curriculum.’ It is unclear how this phenomenon affects trainees during surgical clerkship, especially with respect to ethics and professionalism.

Objective: To identify and explore the main challenges in professionalism experienced by medical students during their surgical clerkship at McMaster as recorded in their critical incident reports (CIRs).

Methods: During surgical clerkship, clerks were assigned a critical incident report (CIR) – a 500-word written reflection on “a challenging experience in professionalism.” Four investigators independently coded CIRs from the class of 2009 and then collectively agreed upon common themes that emerged. This iterative process included the development of a codebook and continued until conceptual saturation was reached (n=69). Through data reduction, the main themes and their related categories were finalized. The data were further explored to compare CIRs of clerks who completed their surgery rotation earlier and of those who completed it later in clerkship. Member-checking was used to validate the findings.

Results: Four main clerk relationships emerged: clerk and healthcare system; clerk and healthcare team; clerk and patients (subgroups: ethics and communication); and clerk and self. A total of 27 professionalism concepts were identified and each was classified under one of the four relationships. Clerks commonly reported challenges in the area of interprofessional communication, breaking bad news and consent. Early clerks were more likely to discuss issues of informed consent and code status, whereas late clerks conveyed more concern about barriers to learning opportunities and experiences with bullying by staff.

Conclusion: Clerks face diverse challenges in professionalism during surgical clerkship in their experiences with self, patients, their surgical team and the healthcare system. Critical incident reports are a rich source of qualitative data that provide unique accounts of clerks’ experiences. This data can be used to guide professionalism curriculum and promote staff awareness to address the significance of the hidden curriculum in clerkship and its influence on clerks as they develop into healthcare professionals.