

Professionalism in Medicine: Results of a National Survey of Physicians

Eric G. Campbell, PhD; Susan Regan, PhD; Russell L. Gruen, MD, PhD; Timothy G. Ferris, MD, MPH; Sowmya R. Rao, PhD; Paul D. Cleary, PhD; and David Blumenthal, MD, MPP

Background: The prospect of improving care through increasing professionalism has been gaining momentum among physician organizations. Although there have been efforts to define and promote professionalism, few data are available on physician attitudes toward and conformance with professional norms.

Objective: To ascertain the extent to which practicing physicians agree with and act consistently with norms of professionalism.

Design: National survey using a stratified random sample.

Setting: Medical care in the United States.

Participants: 3504 practicing physicians in internal medicine, family practice, pediatrics, surgery, anesthesiology, and cardiology.

Measurements: Attitudes and behaviors were assessed by using indicators for each domain of professionalism developed by the American College of Physicians and the American Board of Internal Medicine. Of the eligible sampled physicians, 1662 responded, yielding a 58% weighted response rate (adjusting for noneligible physicians).

Results: Ninety percent or more of the respondents agreed with specific statements about principles of fair distribution of finite resources, improving access to and quality of care, managing conflicts of interest, and professional self-regulation. Twenty-four percent disagreed that periodic recertification was desirable. Physician behavior did not always reflect the standards they endorsed. For example, although 96% of respondents agreed that physicians should report impaired or incompetent colleagues to relevant authorities, 45% of respondents who encountered such colleagues had not reported them.

Limitations: Our measures of behavior did not capture all activities that may reflect on the norms in question. Furthermore, behaviors were self-reported, and the results may not be generalizable to physicians in specialties not included in the study.

Conclusion: Physicians agreed with standards of professional behavior promulgated by professional societies. Reported behavior, however, did not always conform to those norms.

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For author affiliations, see end of text.

Attempts to improve the quality and efficiency of health care have primarily relied on government regulation, financial incentives, public reporting, and competition (1–8). So far, these approaches have not resolved the problems of cost, access, and quality in the U.S. health care system (9).

As a complementary approach to addressing these issues, physician groups have been focusing on promoting medical professionalism among physicians (10). In 2002, the American Board of Internal Medicine and other groups published a Charter on Professionalism (“the Charter”), which has been embraced by many professional organizations in the United States and other countries (11, 12).

The Institute on Medicine as a Profession Survey on Medical Professionalism was developed to enhance understanding of physicians’ attitudes toward professional norms in the Charter, the extent to which they conform to those norms in daily work, and the factors that may influence professional behaviors. We report the results of that survey.

METHODS

Definition of “Professionalism”

Several definitions of “professionalism” exist (13–18). However, many of these definitions have not been put into effect or endorsed by professional societies. For this investigation, we use the definition in the American Board of Internal Medicine’s Charter on Professionalism, because it

has been embraced by many organizations nationally and internationally (11, 12).

Survey Design and Testing

We developed a preliminary set of questions based on a focus group with physicians in which we probed how best to measure physicians’ attitudes and behaviors. The survey was revised on the basis of the results of 8 cognitive interviews. The goal of cognitive interviews is to find out how respondents understand and respond to survey items. A cognitive interview involves a researcher reading questions to respondents, having them answer the questions, and then attempting to determine the cognitive processes that the respondents used to formulate their response. Understanding respondents’ cognitive processes allows the researcher to sense discrepancies between the way respondents performed a task and the way researchers envision the task will be performed (19). The final survey was ap-

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Context

Whether practicing physicians conform to norms of professionalism is unknown.

Contribution

This survey of 3504 practicing physicians in the United States found that most physicians agreed with principles regarding fair distribution of resources, access to and quality of care, conflicts of interest, and self-regulation that were proposed by professional societies in 2002. Self-reported behaviors, however, showed that about one half did not follow self-regulation principles and that about one third would order unneeded magnetic resonance imaging for back pain in response to a patient's request.

Implication

Although physicians generally agree with proposed professional norms, they do not always follow all of them.

—The Editors

proved by the institutional review board of the investigators' institution.

Measures of Professionalism**Attitudes Related to Professionalism**

Several questions measured physicians' support for professional norms. **Table 1** shows the survey questions and their associated dimensions of professionalism.

Behaviors Related to Professionalism

Table 2 shows the survey questions about self-reported behaviors associated with professional norms in the Charter. We did not seek to cover every conceivable behavior related to all 10 norms. Instead, we asked about selected behaviors that were particularly salient and had substantial face validity as tracer measures of conformance to professionalism norms. Thus, our results do not provide a comprehensive assessment of the "professionalism" of respondents but instead provide the basis for exploring factors that may influence physicians' behaviors related to professionalism.

Survey Sample

The sampling frame was the 2003 American Medical Association Masterfile. We selected all physicians in 3 primary care specialties (general internal medicine, family practice, pediatrics) and 3 non-primary care specialties (cardiology, anesthesiology, general surgery). We chose the 3 primary care specialties because they represent almost all primary care physicians in the United States, and we chose the non-primary care specialties because they represent a medical specialty, an inpatient specialty, and surgery. We excluded osteopathic physicians, resident physicians, and physicians in federally owned hospitals. From this list of 271 148 physicians, we randomly selected 3504 who were distributed equally among the 6 specialties. We selected

equal numbers of physicians in each specialty in order to have sufficient statistical power to examine specialty-specific associations.

Survey Administration

As described elsewhere (20), the survey was administered between November 2003 and June 2004. Sampled physicians were sent a survey instrument, a cover letter, a fact sheet describing the study, a postage-paid return envelope, and a prepaid incentive check for \$20. Of the 3504 sampled physicians, 337 were ineligible because they were dead, out of the country, practicing a nonsampled specialty, on leave, or not providing patient care. This yielded a raw eligibility estimate of 90.3%. Of the 3167 eligible physicians, 1662 completed a questionnaire, for an overall raw response rate of 52%. The weighted overall response rate was 58% (43% in cardiology, 57% in anesthesiology, 55% in family practice, 54% in surgery, 52% in internal medicine, and 64% in pediatrics) (21). The weighted overall response rate was calculated as follows: completed interviews/(completed interviews + partial interviews) + (refusals + noncontacts + other) + (eligibility estimate × unknown eligibility physicians). Physicians were classified as "unknown eligibility" if no information was obtained about their eligibility either directly from the physician or from a gatekeeper. No physicians were classified as "other." The specialty-specific weighted response rates account for the differential rates of eligibility within each specialty.

Statistical Analysis

The primary analyses were multivariable and focused on the determinants of reported behaviors related to selected policy-relevant domains of professionalism, such as improving quality of and access to care, maintaining professional competence, managing conflicts of interest, and self-regulation. The 3 independent variables were physician specialty (general internal medicine, family practice, pediatrics, cardiology, anesthesiology, or general surgery), primary practice location (solo or 2-person practice, single specialty group, multispecialty group, staff- or group-model HMO, university or medical school, hospital, and other), and primary reimbursement mechanism (fee-for-service, partial capitation, full capitation, salary, and other).

We ran 3 separate logistic regression models for each professional behavior. Model 1 included gender and specialty as predictors. In models 2 and 3, we examined the effects of primary practice organizations and reimbursement mechanisms while controlling for gender and specialty. In reporting the multivariate analyses, we show regression-adjusted percentages with the corresponding 95% CIs. We report the results of the regression models as the percent predicted to make a given response by each model. For models 2 and 3, these percentages are adjusted for gender and specialty by holding the proportion within each specialty and the proportion of women constant (**Table 2**)

across levels of the predictor variable. The CIs were calculated using the standard error of the fitted values.

All analyses were conducted by using Stata statistical software (Stata, College Station, Texas), and we incorporated Stata's survey commands (22). Data were weighted to reflect sampling probability. The sample weights were calculated as the inverse probability of selection within a survey stratum (physician specialty).

Role of the Funding Source

This study was funded by a grant from the Institute on Medicine as a Profession. The funder had no role in the design, conduct, and analysis of the study or in the decision to submit the manuscript for publication.

RESULTS

Respondent Characteristics

Table 3 shows the weighted characteristics of the respondents. To assess how representative our respondents were, we compared our results with characteristics of all physicians in the American Medical Association database. We found that our respondents were similar to U.S. physicians in terms of gender and foreign medical education

status. Our respondents were less likely to be Asian or white than all U.S. physicians. This may be due to the fact that 25% of physicians in the American Medical Association database are classified as "unknown race or ethnicity."

Attitudes toward Professional Norms

More than 90% of physicians agreed with 8 of the 12 normative statements regarding professionalism posed in the survey (Table 1). Agreement fell below 80% only for the question about periodic recertification.

Self-reported Behaviors Illustrative of Professional Norms

The extent to which behaviors were consistent with professional norms varied with the specific norm (Table 2). For example, physicians reported a high level of conformance with the tenet of honesty with patients: Fewer than 1% reported that they had told patients something that was untrue, and only 3% reported that they had withheld information from patients or family that those individuals should have known. Eleven percent reported breaching patient confidentiality.

Seventy-four percent of physicians reported delivering free care in a setting that serves an underserved sector in

Table 1. Attitudes toward Professionalism*

Domain	Respondents Who Agree (95% CI), %
Just distribution of finite resources	
Physicians should minimize disparities in care due to patient race or gender.	98 (97.0–98.5)
Increasing scientific knowledge	
Physicians should encourage the participation of their patients in clinical trials.	83 (78.8–87.2)
Honesty with patients	
Physicians should disclose all significant medical errors to affected patients and/or guardians.	85 (80.9–88.5)
Improving access to care	
Physicians should provide necessary care regardless of the patient's ability to pay.	93 (90.4–95.6)
Physicians should advocate legislation to assure that all people in the United States have health care insurance coverage.	86 (80.1–91.9)
Improving quality of care	
Physicians should participate in peer evaluations of the quality of care provided by colleagues.	93 (91.4–95.6)
Physicians should be willing to work on quality improvement initiatives.	98 (96.8–98.2)
Maintaining appropriate relationship with patients†	
Please rate the appropriateness of sexual relationships between adult patients and physicians.	91 (88.1–93.0)
Maintaining professional competence	
Physicians should undergo recertification examinations periodically throughout their career.	77 (63.4–90.0)
Maintaining trust by managing conflicts of interest	
Physicians should put the patient's welfare above the physician's financial interests.	96 (95.0–96.9)
Fulfilling professional responsibilities, including self-regulation	
Physicians should report all instances of significantly impaired or incompetent colleagues to hospital, clinic, or other relevant authorities.	96 (94.8–96.5)
Physicians should report all significant medical errors they observe to hospital, clinic, or other relevant authorities.	93 (90.4–95.4)

* Unless otherwise noted, these items were preceded by the stem, "Please indicate how much you agree with each of the following statements." The response categories for these measures were "1. Completely agree, 2. Somewhat agree, 3. Somewhat disagree, 4. Completely disagree." In analyses, the "Completely agree" and "Somewhat agree" responses were coded as 1 and the "Somewhat disagree" and "Completely disagree" were coded as 0.

† The response categories for this item were 0. Never, 1. Rarely, 2. Sometimes, 3. Usually, 4. Always. In analyses, "Never" was coded as 0 and all other responses were coded as 1. For this item, 91% of respondents answered "Never."

Table 2. Professional Behaviors*

Domain	Percentage of Respondents (95% CI)
Just distribution of finite resources	
Scenario: An otherwise healthy, long-term patient presents with his first episode of low back pain, lasting 2 days, with onset following some work around the house. He has no neuromuscular signs or symptoms. You explain to him that his symptoms will likely resolve with rest and analgesia and that you don't think any further investigation is warranted at this stage. However, the patient is convinced that he has a herniated disc and is quite insistent that he should have an MRI scan. Would you... 1. Order the MRI, 2. Order the MRI scan, but say that you are doing so reluctantly, 3. Refuse to order the MRI scan at this time.	36 (25.9–46.6) selected answer 1 or 2
In the last 3 years, have you looked for possible disparities in care due to race or gender in your practice, clinic, hospital, or other health care setting?	25 (17.5–31.7) answered "Yes"
Increasing scientific knowledge	
In the last 3 years, have you served as a reviewer for a professional journal?	10 (6.2–13.8) answered "Yes"
In the last 3 years, have you encouraged 1 or more patients to enroll in a clinical trial?	41 (29.7–53.0) answered "Yes"
Honesty with patients	
In the last 3 years, have you told a patient's family member something about a medical issue that wasn't true?	<1 (0.2–1.1) answered "Yes"
In the last 3 years, have you withheld information that a patient or a patient's family should have known about a medical issue?	3 (1.8–4.4) answered "Yes"
Improving access to care	
Are you currently accepting uninsured patients who are unable to pay?	69 (56.1–80.9) answered "Yes"
What percentage of your patients is uninsured and unable to pay, or covered by Medicaid?†	Mean: 28 (21.2–34.2)
In the last 3 years, have you provided care, with no anticipation of reimbursement, in a setting serving poor and underserved patients?	74 (70.0–78.3) answered "Yes"
Improving quality of care	
Please rate the extent to which you feel prepared to contribute to formal, organized quality improvement efforts.‡	85 (80.2–89.5) answered "Very prepared" or "Somewhat prepared"
In the last 3 years, have you participated in a formal medical error reduction initiative in your office, clinic, hospital, or other health care setting?	53 (44.8–61.6) answered "Yes"
In the last 3 years, have you reviewed another physician's medical records for quality improvement reasons?	56 (48.0–64.4) answered "Yes"
Maintaining professional competence	
Please rate the extent to which you feel prepared to critically evaluate new clinical knowledge.‡	88 (84.4–91.8) answered "Very prepared" or "Somewhat prepared"
In the last 3 years, have you undergone competency assessment by a provider organization or health plan?	33 (27.6–39.4) answered "Yes"
Protecting patient confidentiality	
In the last 3 years, have you inappropriately revealed information about a patient?	11 (7.4–14.7) answered "Yes"
Maintaining trust by managing conflicts of interest	
Scenario: You and your partners have invested in a local imaging facility near your suburban practice. When referring patients for imaging studies, would you . . . 1. Refer your patients to this facility? 2. Refer your patients to this facility and inform patients of your investment? 3. Refer patients to another facility?	24 (19.7–28.2) selected answer 1
Fulfilling professional responsibilities, including self-regulation	
In the last 3 years, have you had direct personal knowledge of a physician who was impaired or incompetent in your hospital, group, or practice? If yes, how often did you report that physician to a hospital, clinic, professional society, or other relevant authority? (1. Always, 2. Usually, 3. Sometimes, 4. Never)	45 (34.1–55.4) selected answer 2, 3, or 4, indicating that they had not reported at least once
Other than the care you or your family received, in the last 3 years have you had direct personal knowledge of a serious medical error in your hospital, group, or practice? If yes, how often did you report that error to a hospital, clinic, professional society, or other relevant authority? (1. Always, 2. Usually, 3. Sometimes, 4. Never)	46 (36.8–56.1) selected answer 2, 3, or 4

* Unless otherwise noted, the response categories for these items were "Yes" and "No."

† This variable was calculated from answers to 2 questions: "What percentage of your patients is uninsured and unable to pay?" and "What percentage of your patients is covered by Medicaid?"

‡ "Prepared" is defined as having the necessary skills and ability. Options were 1. Very prepared; 2. Somewhat prepared; 3. Somewhat unprepared; or 4. Very unprepared.

the past 3 years, and 69% said they were accepting Medicaid or uninsured patients. Furthermore, 28% of physicians' patients were on Medicaid or were uninsured.

Regarding maintenance of professional competence, 88% of physicians felt prepared to evaluate new clinical information. One third of physicians (33%) had partici-

pated in competency assessment by a provider or health plan group in the past 3 years.

In terms of improving the quality of care, 85% felt prepared to participate in formal organized quality improvement initiatives. In the past 3 years, 56% had reviewed another physician's medical records for quality im-

provement purposes, and 53% had participated in a formal error reduction initiative.

With regard to professional self-regulation, 45% of those with direct personal knowledge of a physician in their hospital group or practice who was impaired or incompetent did not always report that physician. Of those with direct personal knowledge of a serious medical error, 46% did not report that error to authorities on at least 1 occasion.

In response to a hypothetical scenario about the distribution of finite resources, 36% of physicians said that they would order unneeded magnetic resonance imaging for back pain in response to patient request. One quarter said that they had looked for possible disparities in their care on the basis of race or gender in their practice, clinic, hospital, or other health care setting.

Multivariable Analyses

Table 4 reports results of multivariable analyses. Specialty was related to self-reported levels of conformance with professional norms, although the influence of specialty varied. For example, cardiologists, surgeons, and anesthesiologists were more likely to report being prepared to evaluate new clinical information (maintaining professional competence). Although cardiologists had fewer Medicaid and uninsured patients than family practitioners did, they were more likely than family practitioners to have provided uncompensated care in a setting serving poor and underserved patients. Cardiologists, together with anesthesiologists and surgeons, were also more likely than the other specialties to accept new uninsured patients (improving access to care). Family practitioners and pediatricians were least likely to report having participated in a formal medical error reduction initiative. However, these physicians, along with internists, were most likely to have undergone competency assessment in the past 3 years.

Practice setting also was associated with some differences in reported behavior regarding professional norms. After we controlled for sex and specialty, physicians practicing in staff-model HMOs were least likely to have provided care without expectation of reimbursement in settings serving the poor and underserved in the last 3 years. Physicians in solo practice were least likely to have participated in a formal medical error reduction initiative and to have reviewed another physician's medical records for quality improvement (improving quality of care).

Physicians' primary reimbursement mechanism was related to several self-reported behaviors assessed in our survey. For example, those in capitation payment arrangements were most likely to have undergone competency assessment by a provider or a health plan in the past 3 years, whereas those who were salaried were least likely to have done so. At the same time, those in fee-for-service arrangements had the smallest proportion of poor and uninsured patients.

Table 3. Respondent Characteristics

Characteristic	Physicians, n	Weighted Proportion, %
Personal		
Sex		
Male	1248	73.4
Female	403	26.5
Race		
Black	63	4.2
Hispanic	59	3.7
Asian	248	15.4
White	1194	71.8
Other	72	4.9
Professional		
Specialty		
Anesthesiology	289	12.0
Cardiology	229	7.1
Family practice	298	23.9
Internal medicine	256	31.6
Pediatrics	323	17.1
Surgery	267	8.2
Primary practice organization		
Solo or 2 person	367	23.0
Group	740	41.5
Staff-model HMO	69	5.6
University/medical school	370	21.5
Other	22	6.5
Primary reimbursement mechanism		
Fee-for-service	772	43.6
Capitation (full or partial)	145	8.9
Salaried	598	38.9
Other	131	8.6

DISCUSSION

We believe that ours is the first effort to broadly assess U.S. physicians' support for and conformance to professional norms. Several notable findings have emerged. First, we found widespread attitudinal and behavioral support for professional norms. This finding suggests that the professional aspirations embodied in the Charter are relevant and meaningful to physicians and thus enhances their validity. It also suggests that advocates of increasing professionalism among physicians do not face the task of convincing physicians that the norms of professionalism are valid.

Second, we do not regard our data on self-reported behaviors as sufficient to judge the overall professionalism of respondents or to conclusively assess their adherence to particular norms. Nevertheless, according to selected indicators, the extent to which physicians' self-reported behaviors conformed to norms varied with the norm. Physicians report behaviors that are consistent with the tenets of being honest with patients and protecting patient confidentiality. However, for other norms, there were gaps between physicians' beliefs and what they reported doing. These gaps were greatest in the area of self-regulation, where almost one half of physicians who were aware of an impaired or incompetent colleague did not bring that colleague to the attention of authorities. Physician behavior also differed

Table 4. Results of Multivariable Analyses

Characteristic	Adjusted Proportion of Respondents (95% CI), %			
	Maintenance of Professional Competence		Professional Self-Regulation	
	Undergone Competency Assessment by a Provider or Health Plan in the Past 3 Years	Was Prepared to Evaluate New Clinical Information	Always Reported Personal Knowledge of a Physician Who Was Impaired or Incompetent to Any Relevant Authority	Always Reported Direct Personal Knowledge of a Serious Medical Error to Any Relevant Authority
Specialty†				
Anesthesiology	21.6 (19.1–24.1)	92.8 (91.2–94.3)	67.6 (62.4–72.7)	46.5 (42.3–50.8)
Cardiology	27.4 (24.4–30.4)	94.9 (93.4–96.4)	44.0 (37.1–51.0)	36.6 (31.8–41.4)
Surgery	25.8 (23.1–28.6)	90.9 (89.1–92.7)	62.6 (56.8–68.4)	48.1 (43.7–52.6)
Internal medicine	36.6 (33.6–39.7)	88.1 (86.0–90.1)	58.4 (50.6–66.3)	61.6 (56.4–66.9)
Family practice	36.4 (33.6–39.2)	84.6 (82.5–86.7)	43.2 (36.1–50.3)	51.0 (46.1–55.9)
Pediatrics	38.1 (35.3–40.9)	86.1 (84.1–88.1)	57.4 (48.7–66.2)	65.1 (59.8–70.3)
Primary practice organization‡				
University/medical school	30.6 (28.0–33.1)	93.4 (92.0–94.7)	63.7 (56.8–70.7)	61.8 (57.9–65.7)
Staff-model HMO	38.9 (32.9–44.8)	86.7 (82.7–90.7)	86.7 (74.0–99.3)	71.2 (62.5–79.9)
Group	32.5 (30.5–34.4)	87.6 (86.2–89.0)	57.7 (52.9–62.5)	51.2 (47.8–54.7)
Solo or 2-person	35.5 (32.9–38.2)	87.3 (85.4–89.1)	45.0 (38.6–51.4)	49.4 (44.4–54.5)
Other	33.1 (28.6–37.7)	86.5 (83.3–89.8)	42.9 (33.1–52.7)	50.7 (43.0–58.3)
Primary reimbursement mechanism‡				
Fee-for-service	32.5 (30.6–34.4)	86.8 (85.4–88.2)	55.1 (50.4–59.9)	48.0 (44.6–51.3)
Capitation	41.5 (37.2–45.7)	86.9 (84.0–89.8)	55.7 (45.8–65.7)	48.5 (41.5–55.5)
Salaried	31.8 (29.8–33.8)	91.3 (90.1–92.5)	56.3 (50.7–62.0)	64.6 (61.3–67.9)
Other	34.4 (30.1–38.7)	86.5 (83.5–89.5)	50.5 (41.6–59.4)	48.7 (40.6–56.9)

* Estimated mean proportion of patients.

† Adjusted for sex.

‡ Adjusted for sex and specialty.

from their beliefs in managing financial conflict of interest, because a larger majority would refer patients to an imaging facility in which they had a financial interest, and one quarter would not inform patients of this potential conflict of interest. Such behavior could be illegal under federal Medicare statutes concerning self-referral. This suggests that physicians may not be adequately aware of the legal restrictions on their behavior.

Another area of discordance involved the distribution of limited resources. More than one third of physicians reported they would accommodate a patient who badly wanted a test, even when they knew the test was unnecessary, thus potentially wasting scarce medical resources. Gaps also existed between physicians' attitudes toward quality improvement and their participation in related activities (23). However, factors external to the physician, such as practice organization, influenced participation in certain quality-related activities. We do not take a negative view of these associations. For example, it is not a physician's sole responsibility if a policy of the organization in which he or she works limits his or her participation in certain professional behaviors, such as caring for the poor or undergoing competency assessment.

Our findings also highlighted factors that are associated with self-reported conformance to norms, and thus offer potential guidance for physician leaders and policymakers who wish to promote conformance to professional

standards. In particular, reported conformance to norms varied across subgroups of physicians. This suggests that the focus of programs encouraging professionalism may need to vary accordingly. For example, cardiologists and surgeons might benefit from education on managing conflict of interest and federal restrictions on self-referral. These groups may also benefit from assistance with professional self-regulation and, in particular, the reporting of serious medical errors.

Further research is needed to explore the reasons for the differences we found among specialties, which could arise from self-selection of individuals into particular specialties, from training experiences, or from environmental influences not accounted for in our study. We controlled for certain aspects of payment method and organization, but we could not measure all relevant factors. For example, cardiologists may earn a larger proportion of their income from imaging than physicians in many other specialties and therefore be more likely to have financial involvements in imaging facilities. Physicians in primary care specialties have struggled recently to maintain their incomes, which may account for their decreased willingness to provide unreimbursed care.

Practice setting and form of reimbursement, independent of specialty, were associated with behaviors related to professional norms. Physicians paid on a fee-for-service basis may face greater challenges with managing conflict of

Table 4—Continued

Adjusted Proportion of Respondents (95% CI), %					
Improve Access to Care			Improve Quality of Care		
Provided Care without Reimbursement in a Setting Serving Poor and Underserved Patients in the Past 3 Years	Currently Accepting New Uninsured Patients	Accepting Patients on Medicaid or Uninsured and Unable to Pay*	Prepared to Contribute to Formal, Organized Quality Improvement Efforts	Participated in a Formal Medical Error Reduction Initiative in the Past 3 Years	Reviewed Another Physician's Medical Records for Quality Improvement Reasons in the Past 3 Years
74.2 (71.6–76.9)	89.8 (87.9–91.7)	23.3 (20.3–26.4)	89.6 (87.7–91.4)	59.7 (56.7–62.6)	65.3 (62.4–68.2)
82.7 (80.1–85.2)	82.7 (80.1–85.4)	20.3 (17.0–23.6)	91.9 (90.0–93.7)	55.1 (51.7–58.4)	56.8 (53.4–60.1)
83.9 (81.6–86.2)	81.2 (78.6–83.7)	24.6 (21.6–27.7)	90.3 (88.4–92.1)	59.2 (56.1–62.3)	61.4 (58.3–64.5)
71.3 (68.4–74.2)	59.2 (55.8–62.6)	25.9 (22.7–29.1)	82.8 (80.5–85.2)	57.7 (54.6–60.8)	51.6 (48.5–54.8)
73.3 (70.7–75.9)	64.9 (61.8–67.9)	26.7 (23.6–29.8)	85.8 (83.8–87.8)	43.9 (41.0–46.8)	61.7 (58.8–64.5)
72.1 (69.5–74.7)	61.2 (58.2–64.3)	39.6 (36.6–42.6)	78.4 (76.0–80.8)	50.0 (47.1–52.9)	48.5 (45.6–51.4)
79.5 (77.2–81.7)	82.6 (80.2–84.9)	28.7 (25.4–32.0)	86.3 (84.4–88.2)	56.1 (53.3–58.9)	52.5 (49.7–55.3)
53.5 (47.4–59.6)	35.8 (28.9–42.8)	28.3 (25.0–31.5)	88.1 (84.4–91.9)	61.7 (55.7–67.7)	69.9 (64.3–75.5)
72.1 (70.2–73.9)	68.0 (65.9–70.1)	26.0 (22.7–29.2)	84.7 (83.2–86.2)	56.3 (54.2–58.3)	60.3 (58.3–62.3)
77.2 (74.8–79.5)	63.9 (61.0–66.8)	27.1 (23.9–30.4)	84.9 (82.9–86.9)	43.5 (40.7–46.2)	50.4 (47.6–53.2)
78.8 (74.9–82.7)	84.5 (80.5–88.6)	28.1 (24.8–31.4)	85.7 (82.3–89.1)	52.2 (47.3–57.0)	54.8 (50.0–59.7)
75.1 (73.3–76.9)	67.4 (65.2–69.5)	21.0 (17.7–24.4)	85.7 (84.3–87.1)	51.4 (49.3–53.4)	57.8 (55.8–59.9)
76.0 (72.3–79.7)	60.8 (56.2–65.4)	25.5 (20.7–30.3)	80.8 (77.4–84.2)	45.6 (41.2–49.9)	57.3 (53.0–61.5)
72.5 (70.6–74.4)	74.6 (72.5–76.7)	35.0 (31.4–38.6)	84.9 (83.4–86.5)	57.7 (55.5–59.8)	56.5 (54.4–58.7)
75.7 (71.9–79.6)	68.3 (63.4–73.1)	31.1 (26.0–36.1)	88.7 (85.9–91.5)	52.4 (47.9–56.9)	48.4 (43.9–52.8)

interest and with professional self-regulation (reporting serious errors). These findings suggest that structural factors of the U.S. health care system probably exert independent effects on the professional activities and attitudes of physicians.

Our study has several limitations. Our measures of behavior did not capture all activities that may reflect on the norms in question. In future investigation, it might be helpful for specialty organizations to develop measures that represent a consensus of affected physicians on how best to quantify both professional attitudes and related behaviors. Another limitation is that we relied on self-reported behaviors, which probably resulted in overreporting of socially desirable activities. Also, although our overall response rate is acceptable, specialty-specific comparisons should be made with caution. This limitation is particularly salient for cardiologists, who had the lowest response rate among the specialties we surveyed. Furthermore, caution is warranted when considering the potential interactions between sex and other variables, such as specialty. With respect to reporting impaired colleagues and errors, we did not ask whether others had reported the impaired colleagues or errors in question. Finally, our study should not be regarded as an assessment of the effects of the American College of Physicians and American Board of Internal Medicine Charter on Professionalism. The survey was probably conducted too soon after the promulgation of the Charter to be a useful indicator of its influence.

Our findings give reason for both optimism and con-

cern. Professional leaders, private managers, and public officials might find reassurance in the near-universal acceptance of key professional norms. At the same time, however, our findings suggest opportunities for increasing levels of professional conformance to these norms, at least in the selected areas we probed. Methods for improving the professionalism of physicians should be explored in future research and may need to vary in design and focus with physician specialty, practice setting, and method of payment.

From Massachusetts General Hospital, Institute for Health Policy, Boston, Massachusetts; School of Public Health, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut; and University of Melbourne, Center for Medical Research, Royal Melbourne Hospital, Parkville, Victoria, Australia.

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Requests for Single Reprints: Eric G. Campbell, PhD, Institute for Health Policy, 50 Staniford Street, 9th Floor, Boston, MA 02114; e-mail, ecampbell@partners.org.

Current author addresses are available at www.annals.org.

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Dr. Gruen: University of Melbourne, 6th Floor, Center for Medical Research, Royal Melbourne Hospital, Parkville, Victoria 3050, Australia.

Dr. Cleary: Yale University, School of Public Health, 60 College Street, New Haven, CT 06513.

Medical Professionalism and the Parable of the Craft Guilds

Professionalism has deep roots in Western society. In his book, *Death of the Guilds*, E.A. Krause (1) makes a compelling case that the medieval European craft guilds are the antecedents of today's professions. The craft guilds have not survived. As a commentary on the article by Campbell and colleagues in this issue (2), I will argue that, like the guilds, the medical profession exists in a 3-way relationship with government and business. As such, its privileged position in society is subject to changes in the balance of power. I developed some of these ideas in a recent essay (3).

The history of the guilds, which rose to power and declined over several centuries, is instructive for the professions (4). The guilds became powerful because they provided an important public service: Their members made high-quality products. The guilds were able to guarantee high quality because they limited production and because they required long apprenticeships and promoted a few apprentices to master status. Moreover, because they limited production, they could assure the public that every piece met a high standard. The local guilds paid taxes to town government and enjoyed its protection. This arrangement had downsides for the public: high prices and scarcity of goods. Eventually, the rise of capitalism led to the demise of the guilds. Businessmen employed former apprentices to make products faster and cheaper, and they paid town governments more than the guilds. The guilds went into a long, slow decline. The proximate cause was actions taken by government and business; the root cause was the guilds' insensitivity to the interests of the public and their failure to adapt to new circumstances. At their peak, guild members made a very good living working at their own pace doing something they enjoyed. In the end, their high prices left an opening for competition and led to their extinction.

The history of the guilds has parallels with the history of the medical profession in the United States. Many physicians do not realize that U.S. doctors enjoyed little or no respect—and had correspondingly poor incomes—in the first half of the 19th century, largely because the scientific basis of medical practice was rudimentary and their treatments were often harmful. As described by Starr (4), the profession rose to eminence because the body of scientific and clinical evidence grew rapidly and became part of the curriculum of medical education. Physicians had to master this body of evidence, and doing so made them valuable to the public. Codes of professional conduct, which first appeared around 1850, emphasized serving patients but also maintaining a monopoly on medical practice. In the first half of the 20th century, the profession benefited from political reforms that gave it control over entry into medical practice, through medical curricula, licensure, and hospital privileges. By 1950, the medical profession was seem-

ingly untouchable. But, since the mid-1960s, the profession has become increasingly subservient to the principal purchasers of health care: business and government.

Seen in light of the history of the medieval guilds, a root cause of the decline of the U.S. medical profession is the rising cost of health care, which has become a very serious problem for both government and business. Our patients appreciate us for being available to help them, knowing what we know, putting their interests above our own, and using effective treatments to improve health (for example, the major decrease in cardiovascular disease mortality in the past several decades). Government and business, however, are reeling from the ever-increasing costs of health care. To business and government, it seems that we seldom say "no," at least in some regions of the United States. As Wennberg (5) has shown, regional practice style varies widely, mostly in relation to the local supply of care, rather than the medical needs of the patient. Fisher and colleagues (6, 7) have shown that services of unproven value account for much of the extra expenditures in regions of high-intensity care and that more intensive care is not associated with better outcomes. Physicians are the decision makers, and they have been on the receiving end of a continuing effort by business and government to control health care expenditures. These efforts have eroded the autonomy of the medical profession.

Perhaps the most constructive response to the present circumstances is a restatement of the professional obligations of the physician: the Charter for Professionalism (8). Among other issues, the Charter addresses the physician's role in the high cost of health care. It states forthrightly that physicians have an obligation to consider everyone—not just the patient in their office—when deciding to order a test or a consultation. The Charter also reiterates longstanding professional obligations to the patient, such as putting the patient's needs before their own, maintaining confidentiality, disclosing conflicts of interest, and reporting physicians who fail to meet professional standards of competence. The Charter says, in effect, that a profession must redefine itself when events require change.

Campbell and colleagues report on a survey that addresses physicians' adherence to the norms of professionalism (2). They sent surveys to a nationally representative sample of physicians, of whom 57.8% responded. Nearly all physicians endorsed the professional norms, but self-reported adherence to norms varied. Fewer than 1% said that they had lied to a patient in the last 3 years, and 11% reported a failure to maintain confidentiality. High proportions had given free care recently and accepted patients on Medicare and Medicaid. Only about one half had reviewed medical records for quality assessment purposes or had participated in a quality initiative to reduce medical errors. The same proportion had reported an impaired or

incompetent colleague. One third would order an unneeded MRI for a patient who demanded it, and one quarter would refer a patient to a facility in which they had an equity interest without informing the patient of their conflict of interest.

The survey gives our profession a mixed review. Physicians seem to agree that professional norms are relevant to today's practice and are valid, which is an important precondition to acting in accord with them. However, they do not consistently participate in self-regulation of the integrity of their profession, are willing to order unneeded but costly tests to avoid conflict with an insistent patient, and don't understand or willfully ignore their obligation to disclose self-interest. We can—indeed we must—improve our performance in many of these areas.

Trying to get some perspective from which to propose a way forward, I return to the history of the craft guilds, which I believe is a parable for our own times. The masters had it good: income, working conditions, and status in the community. In time, they became an obstacle to the rise of capitalism—with its increased employment, lower prices, and better access to goods—and government, which valued the advantages of a strong economy over the tax revenues and high-quality but expensive and scarce goods the public got from the guild masters. The medical profession is currently under the thumb of powerful societal forces, largely because government and business cannot cope with the high costs triggered by doctors' decisions. The Charter for Professionalism has taken an important step in the right direction. It has enlarged the definition of professionalism by telling physicians that they must commit themselves to the following:

Commitment to a just distribution of finite resources. While meeting the needs of individual patients, physicians are required to provide health care that is based on the wise and cost-effective management of limited clinical resources. The provision of unnecessary services not only exposes one's patients to avoidable harm and expense but also diminishes the resources available for others (8).

The translation of these words into sustained action is a large undertaking. So far, government and business are taking the lead by creating various incentives to encourage a lean, evidence-based style of practice. Will we respond

grudgingly to these carrots and sticks, or will we meet our partners halfway?

Who will lead us? Professional organizations can take a larger role than they have, but, ultimately, medical practice style—like politics—is local, as Wennberg's research has shown irrefutably. The opinion leaders in a medical community used to set the tone for practice style and ethical behavior. But how will they transmit their example to others, when physicians in office practice are much less likely to meet and talk, as they once did in the corridors of the hospital or at hospital staff meetings? Isolation within a fragmented local practice community is just one problem to solve if physicians are to learn from each other. But solve these problems we must. The parable of the craft guilds teaches us that community institutions, such as the professions, must adapt or wither.

Harold C. Sox, MD
Editor

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