

## **“Ethics in the professions and society”**

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In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in professionalism and ethics, both in academia and in the public realm. While the medical profession is often singled out, concerns about ethics and professionalism extend to the legal profession, the clergy, teachers, accountants and others with specialised skills.

Professionals are people who have special knowledge and training resulting from in-depth study of complex fields that are of great social importance. They are considered to be dedicated to using their knowledge and skills in morally acceptable ways for the benefit of individuals and society, and to be motivated by concern for helping people and contributing to the common good over and above earning a reasonable living.

Being an ethical professional requires striving for excellence in work; dealing honestly and respectfully with others; communicating effectively; having the ability to reason about and act on what is right and wrong; and showing humility and compassion in interactions with vulnerable people. Because of the specialised and complex nature of professional work and the need for wise judgement in the face of uncertainty (especially in medicine and the law) professionals are required to be persons of competence and integrity who can be trusted.

Sociologists have long been critical of those who claim to be professionals but instead of living up to the above expectations, are arrogant, self-serving and not to be trusted to place the interests of others above their own. While professionals contest the validity of such criticism, it would seem that erosion of altruism and greater emphasis on self-interest and status are more evident in a world in which professions are being transformed by market forces.

For example, in medical practice, concerns for patients' best interests are to some extent being eclipsed by over-commercialization of health care. Moreover, blind faith in scientific and technological progress leads to social acceptance of higher payment for technical procedures than for excellence in human interactions. This is also evident in the legal profession which has become increasingly focused on the technicalities of procedure.

As medical research becomes more prestigious and increasingly driven (and even controlled) by the financial interests of commercial sponsors, research fraud also appears to be on the increase. The South Korean stem cell researcher is the most recent example of an academic guilty of fraud in research through pursuit of fame and fortune.

Finally, the willingness and ability of professionals to govern themselves and to deal with unethical colleagues has not met up to public expectations. These shortcomings, together with pervasive conflicts of interest, all contribute to diminished public trust.

We can understand how these changes have arisen by recognizing the tension between powerful ideologies that drive human behaviour. Perhaps the most dominant is the market ideology that has resulted in incremental commercialization of all aspects of life. Then there is the ideology of bureaucracy that has led to growth in numbers and power of managers over professionals. Indeed, in complex organizations, for example medical aid schemes, many decisions which should be taken by those with the requisite expertise are increasingly being taken by managerial staff.

The spread of market values and the growth of bureaucracy in social institutions like hospitals and universities are transforming them into organizations that resemble corporations, intent on pursuing their financial goals with less interest in the lives of those they should be serving. These institutional forces tend to eclipse the ideology of professionalism, weaken ideals and impede rather than facilitate ethical behaviour. It has been argued that the central purposes of important social institutions, like universities and health care systems, are being greatly undermined by excessive emphasis on bureaucratic and other activities that overshadow the pursuit of knowledge or the provision of optimal care.

Professionals play a very important role in society. Indeed, society could not function effectively without trustworthy professionals. This raises questions about the ethics of how institutions operate and exert influence on those who work within them. In the face of the powerful forces eroding professionalism there is a great need to promote core professional values. Professionals cannot avoid interfacing with market and bureaucratic forces but these should not diminish their ideals and commitments.

Concerns about unethical behaviour are not limited to professionals. Increasingly the ethical behaviour of those who wield power – in government, the military, business, and public corporations – is also under scrutiny. Fraudulent activity in government and in business corporations has shaken public trust in those who wield political or financial power.

There is a pressing need to encourage ethics, integrity and pride in one's work in all walks of life. Hence the potential value of endeavours to promote knowledge of what it means to be ethical, and to assist in actually implementing ethical practices in the workplace. All societies have much to gain by elevating the ideals of ethical integrity and the pursuit of social justice above the pursuit of power and money.

#### **Additional readings:**

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Statement on Professionalism:

<http://www.osbar.org/rulesregs/professionalism.htm>