Answering the Challenge: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion as a Key to Professionalism

To the Editor:

We read with interest the recent commentary titled “Discriminatory and Sexually Inappropriate Remarks from Patients and Their Challenge to Professionalism” by Alfandre and Geppert.1 We agree that “the profession should undoubtedly maintain a strong moral commitment to effectively address discrimination,” but we think it is important to consider the authors’ suggestion that addressing discrimination toward health care professionals comes at “[t]he expense of the primary commitment to care for patients.” Ideally, professionalism should encompass not only the physician’s responsibility to patients, but also the reciprocity of the patient–physician relationship and the responsibility of institutional leadership to its physicians.

The viewpoint expressed in this article reflects an important, though somewhat limited, discussion of attention to racist and sexist behavior as a distraction from our “primary professional obligations.” Professionalism is sometimes presented as separate from cultural sensitivity, when in fact, it is a means to adhere to our values as health care clinicians. The International Charter for Human Values in Healthcare identifies and promotes core values for all health care interactions as a guide to professional behavior.2 Professionalism applies to all relationships within health care; all stakeholders share responsibility in upholding these values. The Charter on Professionalism for Health Care Organizations3 identifies 4 domains that must be addressed to maintain healthy patients and a healthy workforce, and these domains require attention from multiple policy stakeholders.

We suggest that the challenge of objectionable patient behavior can be better addressed through global commitments to a healthy workplace and to inclusion and diversity as outlined in The Charter on Professionalism. Promoting growth in workforce diversity, equity, and inclusion is essential to appropriate professional behavior toward patients, colleagues, and the public.4 Focusing on these components of professionalism will help to foster a culturally sensitive and competent health care environment that models professional and ethical behavior. These values create the psychologically safe culture that is vital to the well-being of our patients and to the well-being of our medical workforce.

We applaud Alfandre and Geppert for tackling this important issue, and we hope that readers will remember that everyone is deserving of respect and sensitivity. In this way, we can honor our shared humanity.

Elizabeth A. Rider, MSW, MDa,b
Sarah Diekman, MDS,c,d
Tina L. Doshi, MD, MHS,e
Mamta Gautam, MD, MBA,f
Julie K. Silver, MDg

aDepartment of Pediatrics, Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA
bDivision of General Pediatrics, Department of Pediatrics, Boston Children’s Hospital, Boston, MA
cFlorida A&M College of Law, Orlando, FL
dStudent Ethics Liaison, American Public Health Association, Washington, DC
eDepartment of Anesthesiology and Critical Care Medicine, Division of Pain Medicine, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Baltimore, MD
fDepartment of Psychiatry, University of Ottawa, Ont, Canada
gDepartment of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amjmed.2020.02.010

References

Funding: None.

Conflict of Interest: None.

Authorship: All authors participated in the conceptualization, preparation, writing, reviewing, and editing of the manuscript.

Requests for reprints should be addressed to Elizabeth A. Rider, MSW, MD, Division of General Pediatrics, Department of Pediatrics, Boston Children’s Hospital, 300 Longwood Ave, Boston, MA 02115.

E-mail addresses: elizabeth_rider@hms.harvard.edu, erider@hms.harvard.edu

0002-9343/$ -see front matter © 2020 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.