



# The Set and Setting: Professionalism Defined

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This paper delineates the qualities and competencies that define professional behaviors and competencies. Aspects of professionalism are approached from the perspective of the necessity to quantify and maintain standards in order to protect the public from the influence of moral relativism. The overall objective of this paper is to describe the set and setting of professionalism.

**Discussion:** Professionalism is defined firstly by the disciplines that qualify by their attributes as the professions (set), and how these attributes and characteristics are delivered by the professional to the client (setting), resulting in the tenets of professionalism.

**Conclusion:** The definition of professionalism is a construct of the set and setting which synthesize to make up the defining characteristics of principles of professionalism. This paper advocates for professional principles and standards to be maintained to ensure that the trust given to professionals by society is strengthened. (J Chiropr Humanit 2005;12:33-37)

**Key Indexing Terms:** Chiropractic; Ethics, Professional; Professionalism

## INTRODUCTION

As the concepts and tenets of professionalism have evolved over many years, there is currently emerging a consensus of values and attributes that characterize the key tenets of professionalism for the modern professional. This is seen in a growing body of evidence, taken both from the middle years of the past century and the last decade. The recent years have also given rise to an interest in better

quantifying the ethics and virtues that embody professional work.<sup>1-4</sup>

Ethics and professionalism are integrally linked with each other. All professionals are required to understand and practice the ethics of care because professionals serve the public and members of the public have great personal needs that they give over to professionals in their time of need.<sup>5</sup> The professional then uses his or her specialized education, skills and experience to help the client during this time of great need. The pre-eminent reason the public demands that professionals practice good ethics is for protection; first and foremost is the protection of the individual client as one

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member of society as a whole, and in a reciprocal way, protection toward the professional.<sup>1,6</sup>

## DISCUSSION

### The Need for Definition

Professional associations and regulatory bodies are given legislative authority to enforce standards and define protocols for the delivery of professional services. All regulated professions have written codes of conduct, ethics, and standards of behavior. Since the overriding principle of professionalism is that of trustworthiness, the usual marketplace axiom of 'buyer beware' does not apply.<sup>5,7</sup>

Today's Western society is not known for advocating and nurturing high standards of values, morals, and ethics. This present culture has been formed by erosion in personal values over the past several decades. It is now fashionable to believe that decisions of right and wrong are personal, subjective, and relative to any given situation. Known as *moral relativism*, this allows anyone in the public domain claiming to be morally acceptable, to be conferred as morally acceptable, and hence beyond reproach. Judging other's morals and behaviors is considered intolerant and not a contemporary part of our modern society and way of thinking.<sup>2,8</sup>

This is in sharp contrast with the principles of professionalism. Unequivocal professional working standards are essential for the greater good. Professions have written codes of conduct, ethics and behaviors in order to guard against changing societal standards. If these changes in society's moral standards affect the professions, there would be an erosion of the high standards demanded of professionals. These standards protect the public by ensuring the highest level of trust.<sup>9-13</sup>

While practicing in an ethical manner is not an option, the law, through legislative acts and regulations, can only go so far in setting out what the minimum standards are, in terms of what is strictly forbidden in the clinical milieu. While the law does not establish precise optimal performance, professionalism demands that professionals strive for and maintain excellence in the both the 'set' and the 'setting'. Optimal behavior is particularly demonstrated in prudent practice of the ethics and virtues of care.<sup>14</sup>

### The 'Set' of Professionalism

Professionalism is the manifestation of the optimal attitudes and behaviors advocated in those vocations known as professions. The term 'professional' signifies one who is professing to the world something of great value for the greater good. The two most basic features of every profession are control over a specialized body of knowledge, and a commitment to use this knowledge for good. The expanded definitive description of a profession is made up of the following features:<sup>9-12</sup>

1. A defined body of knowledge and skills; this knowledge built upon rational theories and facts; and disseminated in scholarly publications and related academic venues;
2. A long and formal education process, culminating in qualifications sufficient to meet working admission standards, with the terms and conditions having been established by those engaged in practice;
3. The work and knowledge are controlled and organized by associations that are independent of state and government;
4. The mandate of these associations is formalized by written documents that include state or jurisdictional laws governing authority, licensure, continuing education and conduct;

***“Professionalism is service through the use of specialized knowledge, skills, and experience; holding oneself to the highest standards of thought, word, and deed.”***

5. Individual members practicing under the authority of these associations remain completely autonomous, so long as they work within the prescribed regulations;
6. A commitment to serve in one’s area of expertise including the ameliorating of pain and suffering, participating in researching newer and safer practices, serving as an authority in public affairs related to one’s domain, and valuing performance and the public’s interest above financial reward; and
7. Members are held to a higher standard of behavior than non-members, ensuring public trust.

Embodied in these seven tenets is one professing to society the promise of trustworthiness, and professing not to use these specialized skills for self-service and self-reward, but to use these skills for doing good to others for the betterment of society. This completely embodies what is known as the fiduciary relationship.

Professionalism therefore may be defined and expressed in the context of these distinguishing characteristics, these constituting the ‘set’ of professionalism.

### **The ‘Setting’ of Professionalism**

If these 7 hallmark defining characteristics of a profession are the ‘set’ of the professional, then the delivery of the professional’s skills forms the ‘setting’. While there is little published literature on the ‘setting’ of practicing one’s profession, it is of great interest to educators, regulators and all professional associations.<sup>15</sup>

#### ***1. Interpersonal skills***

If we accept that interpersonal skills, while being an essential component of practicing one’s skill successfully to the highest level,

are neither to be the defining hallmarks nor distinguishing features of professionalism, they do convey an important expression of it. Anecdotally, we tend to consider an individual to embody professionalism, when our first impressions are with regard to outward appearance, grooming, compassion, and the ability to communicate, through the use of well-developed interpersonal skills. Well-developed interpersonal and communication skills form the venue for the professional encounter to be optimized.

#### ***2. Appearance***

Since society has an expectation of the professional’s appearance, the individual practitioner must take care to understand how this expectation fits in the professional’s work. Moral relativism has affected all aspects of our society including individual appearance. A cogent example of this among professional students is the wearing of baseball caps and hats.

Until recently, the wearing of hats or caps indoors was considered inappropriate and never a part of the professional’s image. Our current society’s youth now include baseball caps as an acceptable part of expressing one’s own personal fashion.

While baseball caps may be tolerated in lecture halls during university undergraduate classes, these same baseball caps are not accepted by formalized dress codes in professional colleges’ teaching clinics and other observation settings where young professional students meet and work. Allowing them to be worn in classes, small group tutorials and labs is imprudent, because they are not embraced by professional standards of appearance. Mentoring begins early.<sup>16-18</sup>

Appearance matters and first impressions count. Presenting oneself in a direct, friendly, caring way provides the ‘setting’ in which to deliver the ‘set’. In the 1970s, a wardrobe engineer studied how dress and appearance affected attitudes and reactions. *Dress for Success* was written for a young generation seeking to move up the corporate and professional ladder by being careful to understand how images generated from clothing provide a vehicle for professional success; and then by intentionally selecting clothing in order to facilitate that advancement.<sup>19</sup>

### **3. Attitude**

There is little written about the attitude one brings to the doctor-patient interaction, although self-help and practice management seminars abound in most disciplines, albeit often as a strategy of sharpening one’s financial acumen. One of the hallmark features of success, attendees are often told, is to have a ‘success oriented attitude’.

A positive attitude can be delivered in various ways, but no double-blind randomized control trial needs to be conducted in order to show that patients have greater satisfaction with the clinical encounter when their professional gives every appearance of enjoying the opportunity to serve them. Attentive listening, good eye contact, the occasional use of appropriate humor and a positive mental attitude are, by consensus, essential components in the ‘setting’ of professionalism.

### **Characteristics of Professionalism**

Having defined both the ‘set’ and ‘setting’ of professionalism, we are able to list the characteristics that embody professionalism. In 1980, the American Board of Internal Medicine published a position paper regarding the importance of training its

physicians in the art of the humanistic qualities of integrity, respect, and compassion. In the 1990s, that same board embarked on a similar process to address this issue, calling that project and the resulting publication *Project Professionalism*. These initiatives dealt with professionalism, in all of its basic categories and various sub-categories.<sup>10,12</sup>

These and other writings state a common theme in identifying the defining characteristics that are shared by all professionals in maintaining the high standards of professionalism as follows. Professionals:

1. subordinate their own interests to the needs of the client/patient;
2. hold to high ethical and moral standards;
3. respond to the needs of society within their community;
4. are honest, caring, respectful, and trustworthy;
5. are accountable for themselves, as well as accountable for and to their colleagues;
6. are competent by committing themselves to scholarship and life-long learning;
7. are held to higher standards in competence, behavior, decision making, and accountability.

### **CONCLUSION**

Having articulated the set and setting and the key tenets of professionalism, the definition of the term is proposed as follows: *Professionalism* is service through the use of specialized knowledge, skills, and experience; holding oneself to the highest standards of thought, word, and deed.

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