

Nurses' essential role in supporting professionalism

What's your part in maintaining high standards?

By Marilyn Dubree, MSN, RN, NE-BC; April Kapu, DNP, APRN, ACNP-BC; Michelle Terrell, MSN, CPNP-AC; James W. Pichert, PhD; William O. Cooper, MD, MPH; and Gerald B. Hickson, MD

WHAT DOES IT MEAN to be a professional? Providing care of the highest technical quality, of course. But professionalism also includes communicating clearly, being self-reflective, and consistently modeling responsibility, respect, and advocacy. Professionalism for nurses has always meant healing the sick, nurturing the wounded, placing patients first, providing holistic care, and educating new professionals. These qualities are reinforced in

statements of nursing ethics and conduct. But behaviors that undermine a culture of safety persist.

This article is the first in a series that describes strategies nurses and other healthcare team members can use to address unprofessional behavior and promote accountability.

Building a professionalism infrastructure

A supportive plan helps healthcare professionals and their organiza-

tions successfully address behavior and performance that undermines their culture of safety. (See *Questions for reflection*.) Health care is inherently stressful, and anyone can suffer an occasional slip or lapse. But during your career, you've probably encountered a few team members who seem to model patterns of unprofessional or unsafe behavior. (See *I just heard something that worries me*.)

Clinicians need a fair, measured



Questions for reflection

Drawing on your professional experience, please take a moment to reflect on the following questions.

- 1 What's your personal definition of professionalism, and what behaviors have you witnessed that undermine a culture of safety?
- 2 What's your organization's definition of professional conduct?
- 3 What's your organization's plan for promoting professionalism and holding all team members accountable?

approach for reporting and responding to occasional slips, preventing the development of harmful patterns, and addressing persistent patterns when they emerge. Three major elements help establish a robust, effective infrastructure:

- management, leadership, and peer commitment
- a goal-driven, fair model and process to guide graduated interventions
- multilevel, systemwide professional training in intervention-related communication skills.

Communication skills training is important, but those conducting interventions will lack essential support without an associated infrastructure, genuine leadership commitment, and meaningful data.

Leadership commitment

Managers and leaders have responsibility for knowing and pursuing their organization's vision, mission, and goals. To be successful, leadership responsibilities include holding all team members accountable for modeling professional behaviors, routinely enforcing the group's code of conduct equitably regardless of seniority or status, and taking timely action designed to address behaviors or performance that undermine a culture of safety.

Graduated intervention model

In addition to leadership, organizations need policies, resources, and surveillance tools to identify both single events and emerging patterns that are inconsistent with the organization's mission, values, and goals. To reduce the likelihood a pattern will emerge, your organization should consistently address single events. Then, when a pattern appears or persists, leaders must design and hold clinicians accountable for action plans intended to improve performance.

We advocate a tiered interven-

I just heard something that worries me

Most nurses know professionalism when they see it, and that unsafe or disrespectful behavior interferes with teamwork and patient care. Here are a few examples that in most cases warrant a follow-up conversation.

Disrespectful behavior that undermines teamwork

- "Nurse A always leaves patients' rooms a disaster...you don't want to follow her."
- Nurse B said loudly and publicly: "I can't believe this! You don't know how to do this simple task?"

Unsafe behavior that interferes with achieving desired outcomes

- Nurse to orientee who's unwrapping supplies for a scrub-the-hub protocol designed to reduce line infections: "Oh, I don't bother with that stuff. I've been taking care of lines a lot longer than you and my lines rarely get infected."
- Nurse to patient: "Stop pushing the call light. I have other patients who are really sick!"
- "My hands are always clean. Having to wash every time I enter every patient's room is silly. It's just another burden the hospital puts on nurses."

Disrespectful and unsafe behavior

- Nurse to nurse: "The patient just had a simple slip onto the floor. I wouldn't call it a fall that you have to record. The big falls require a ton of documentation."
- Nurse to patient: "Don't worry, I'm here now. Nurse C is new and doesn't quite know what's best."

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tion model. (See *Promoting Professionalism Pyramid*.) The interventions associated with this model are summarized below. Note that the pyramid's base reflects the fact that most healthcare team members consistently perform as professionals and simply need occasional recognition for work well done.

Honing intervention skills

In a healthcare culture that em-

bodies professionalism, clinicians willingly share concerns. They understand the need to act respectfully and that failure to act not only is noticed by patients, families, peers, and other team members, but also can threaten trust. However, you may encounter barriers to action. Overcoming those barriers requires consistently implementing a proven process and the skills for providing feedback.

The pyramid's first intervention level suggests that when what appears to be a single slip or lapse occurs, all that may be needed is an informal conversation between peers, what we call *Cup of Coffee* conversations. In our view, single incidents generally do not require investigation, which may provoke disputes, fail to identify the truth, and delay sharing. However, single incidents involving allegations of serious conduct (for example, violations of law or organizational policy, such as practicing under the influence, impairment, and inappropriate touch) do mandate leadership-level investigation and management.

The pyramid model illustrates

