

## Process for Addressing Breaches of Professionalism by Undergraduate Medical Students

### **Background**

The Educational Outcomes of Dalhousie's undergraduate medical education program includes the Professional Role as one of the four domains of student achievement. In this domain, competencies in professionalism are spelled out in learning objectives addressing attitudes, knowledge, skills, and behaviours. These are essential for students to master in preparing to assume the role of physician.

In addition, the Faculty of Medicine has endorsed a Professionalism Policy, which sets out principles and expectations for all members of our learning community, as well as a Code of Conduct specific to UGME students.

The purpose in developing this process is to provide mechanisms by which professionalism deficiencies observed in undergraduate students can be identified, addressed, and remediated, as well as mechanisms for disciplinary procedures where necessary. Learning to become a professional, as does learning to become an expert clinician, requires teaching, mentoring, assessment and feedback. Not all students learn skills at the same rate and some will need more guidance than others in achieving mastery of the professional role. For this reason, professionalism deficiencies are appropriately treated in most instances as learning deficits for which the learner is given formative feedback and opportunities to remediate.

However, unsuccessful remediation, recurring unprofessional behaviour, or egregious unprofessional conduct may result in academic failure and in disciplinary procedures being properly invoked.

### **Expectations of Students**

Students in a medical education program are granted some of the privileges (eg. taking medical histories) and assume some of the responsibilities of physicians (e.g. duty to maintain confidentiality of patient information) and therefore it is expected they will conduct themselves appropriately. Their fitness to study and practice medicine will depend on their willingness and ability to do so. Assessments which indicate a demonstrated unwillingness or inability to act in accordance with the professional role they are expected to master may result in academic failure.

Students should be guided in their learning and behave in accordance with the values espoused and expectations set out in the Faculty of Medicine Professionalism Policy, the Undergraduate Medical Student Code of Conduct, the CMA Code of Ethics, any university-wide policies relating to student conduct, academic integrity and harassment, and any other documents intended to address professional behaviours of students in the Faculty of Medicine at Dalhousie University. Medical students are novice members of the profession, reflected by their registration with the various Colleges. As such, they should be progressing towards being able to fulfill the standards expected of members of the medical profession.

## **Scope of Process**

This process is intended to be used when instructors, students or others have concerns that a student may be displaying unprofessional attitudes or behaviours when engaged in activities related to the educational program, university-sponsored activities, when using university-supported services (e.g. use of college communications) or when identifiable in public as a medical student.

## **Process**

Most incidents giving rise to concerns regarding students' professionalism will be of a minor nature and may arise from learners' ignorance, confusion or misunderstanding of the standards they are expected to meet. Some will be the result of misperceptions or miscommunication. For this reason, it is appropriate to treat these matters as learning issues requiring discussion and address them as such in an effective and timely manner. When there is a learning issue identified, it is very important that the student be given feedback so that the student has an opportunity to learn and demonstrate that learning has occurred. This formative feedback is very important in promoting the learner's development of professionalism. In addition, since it is important to know whether learning has occurred and has translated into improved professional behaviours, and to track recurring instances of unprofessional behaviours or attitudes, this formative feedback must be documented in the appropriate mid-unit/rotation and end of unit/ rotation assessments of professionalism which are provided to and reviewed by the UGME Dean.

In other instances, incidents may raise grave concerns about the student's fitness for the study and eventual practice of medicine and recourse to disciplinary procedures and failure of a year or expulsion from the program may be the appropriate resolution. Students in Dalhousie University's UGME program should be able to conduct themselves in a range of professional and educational environments without the need for frequent remediation and where this cannot be achieved, failure or dismissal from the program may be necessary.

The process for achieving these aims in a fair and transparent manner will necessitate that the student be informed of the concern(s) in a timely manner, provided with copies of the documents describing the concern(s), and given an opportunity to respond to the concern(s) verbally and/or in a written account in accordance with the Progress and Evaluation Regulations.

For those who have the opportunity to teach, assess and provide feedback to students:

- The concern should be discussed and addressed with the student as soon as is practicable given the circumstances. The assessor should document in writing (preferably in the designated evaluation form): the professionalism concern noted; how the matter was addressed with the student; a summary of the discussion which took place with the student; if/how the matter was resolved; and, any plans for follow-up with the student. If any recommendations or referrals are made to Student Affairs or elsewhere, these should be noted and documented.

- The student should be given the opportunity to document his/her account of the incident, what learning was provided, if/ how the matter was resolved, any plans for follow-up and any assistance being sought which they wish to be noted. Students should be given a copy of the evaluation or other form used to document the concern.
- All documentation will be sent to the attention of the Associate Dean UGME and placed in the student's file in the UME Dean's office.

For those who do not have the opportunity or responsibility to teach, provide feedback or assess the student:

- A Professionalism Concern form (available in the UGME Office or on the UGME website) may be completed and sent directly to the UGME Dean. Such form will note the behaviour and context in which the concern arose, whether the student was made aware of the concern, if/how it was addressed by the individuals involved and if/how it was resolved.
- If the student was not made aware of the concern, then the UGME Dean (or delegate) must meet with the student or otherwise provide the student with the opportunity to respond to the concern and give his/her account. The student should be provided with a copy of the completed Professionalism Concern form.
- This meeting will be documented by the Associate Dean UGME. If any referrals are made to Student Affairs or elsewhere, this will be noted and documented.

In all instances, regardless of how a professionalism concern is brought forward, the Associate Dean UGME (or a delegate) may meet with the student and/or complainant to determine whether the concern indicates the student is having difficulty meeting professionalism standards, discuss and address learning needs, engage appropriate faculty or instructional staff who can provide remediation and monitoring, and determine whether any disciplinary action is required.

If the concern is not substantiated, the documentation will be removed from the student's file and destroyed. If the concern is substantiated, the documentation will be kept in the student's file for tracking purposes. It may or may not be used at the discretion of the Associate Dean UGME in the preparation of the student's Dean's Letter (or equivalent).

If the incident or concern is an isolated occurrence, is not egregious in nature, and the plan to address and monitor the student's progress throughout the unit or rotation is successfully carried out, then no further action may be required.

A number of conditions, including, but not limited to the following, may trigger further action by the Associate Dean UGME:

- where the assessment requires remediation beyond the scope of the current unit or rotation (see the Policy for Pre-Information on Students Encountering Serious Difficulties Which Adversely Affect Academic/Clinical Performance);

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- where there is a pattern of reports demonstrating failure to progress satisfactorily in the realm of professionalism;
- where there is a failure to remediate;
- where a reported action is egregious in nature;
- where there are violations of university policies governing academic integrity and harassment;

In these or other instances, the UME Dean may elect to do one or more of the following:

further investigate the matter;

make a referral and recommendation to Progress Committee;

make any other referrals deemed appropriate;

recommend remediation;

treat the matter as a disciplinary matter.