What Is Professionalism?

Students sometimes wonder why they are required to wear scrubs to class, wear proper footwear in the lab, pull back and secure hair, and have nails short and natural. It's because Hondros College of Nursing is the beginning of your life and role as a professional, and these requests have to do with safety, infection control, and professionalism.

Your profession, whether it is nursing or medical lab technology, requires education and specialized training. “But simply working in an identified profession does not automatically make one a professional. Professionalism involves much more than degrees and credentials. It includes a certain work ethic, attitude, code of conduct, appearance, communication style, among other matters” Cardillo (2009).

Some thoughts and ideas on professionalism relevant to today’s healthcare workers can be found below, along with some information about what it takes to be a true professional and what professional appearance, demeanor, and behavior look like.

Attitude Is Everything

The way you view your world and portray yourself to others is everything. A smile goes a long way, and personal issues should be left at home. There are always going to be things in our lives that threaten our positive outlook, so we need to try to be grateful for everything we have and convert “I have to” to “I get to” (Gokenbach, 2012).

Appearance Is Critical

Image and appearance matter more than many people realize, and unfortunately for some, people judge others by their personal appearance. If you look like you care about yourself, it’s easier for patients to feel that you will be able to care for them. You need to be aware that you communicate a great deal to them in the first few seconds of interaction, many times before you have had a chance to speak.

Cardillo (2009) emphasizes that you need to keep in mind that patients put their welfare in your hands, entrust you with their lives, and rely on you to advocate for them and make life-saving decisions on their behalf. This level of responsibility requires an appearance worthy of that trust. You have to inspire confidence in others by dressing in a manner that conveys maturity, seriousness of purpose, and conservative good taste. In other words, you have to create a professional image to reflect the professional person you are. Whether you’re wearing scrubs, uniforms, or street clothes, they should be clean, unwrinkled, in good repair, and conservative in appearance. This includes footwear and accessories (Cardillo, 2009).

While tattoos and piercings are very popular these days, not everyone is comfortable with them. They can be offensive and sometimes even frightening to some patients, and many employers prohibit them for these reasons. Keep in mind that your patients’ needs are more important than your desire for self-expression (Cardillo, 2009). Many work places require you to cover your tattoos and remove piercings, and Hondros College of Nursing requires this as well.

“Professional is not a label you give yourself - it's a description you hope others will apply to you.” —David Maister

“A true professional not only follows but loves the processes, policies and principles set by his profession.” —Amit Kalantri

We choose what attitudes we have right now. And it's a continuing choice. —John C. Maxwell
Professional Demeanor Is a Must

How you act in a situation tells a lot about your character and can either show your confidence and competence or destroy it. Learning the principles of conflict management and clear communication can help you stay calm and remain in control when faced with criticism or hostility. You should be aware of your body language and other non-verbal communication; it tells your patients a lot about you. Facial expressions and eye rolling when a physician or coworker says something you don’t agree with tells your patient that the healthcare team doesn’t work well together. Be mindful of conversations you have and comments you make where patients and their family can hear you. Criticizing a coworker or manager can make patients uneasy and question the quality of their care (Cardillo, 2009).

It’s important to always greet patients and their family members with a smile, eye contact, and a hand shake or light touch. Be sure to maintain the utmost respect for your patients, and remember that he or she is not just an illness or a disease but a person with a life, a family, a culture, and a nationality. Patients are your clients; you serve them, so be caring as well as technically astute while remaining connected and focused on their care. If you concentrate exclusively on your work routine, you may overlook what your profession is all about (Cardillo, 2009).

Your Public Persona Is Part of Your Professional Persona

No matter what you do or where you go, you are always representing your chosen profession. People will judge the profession based on their encounter with you – whether in the healthcare setting or not. You have an obligation to act responsibly and within the law at all times (Cardillo, 2009). Emails and posts on social media sites should only include those things that you would want to see on the front page of the newspaper or explain to a loved one.

Tell Them Who You Are and What You’re Doing

Introduce yourself with your name and title, and don’t assume people will know what you do or who you are by the nature of your work. Wear a visible name badge at all times. When meeting patients, tell them your name and that you are the nurse in charge of their care or the technician who will take their blood. Patients want and need to know who their health care providers are and to whom questions should be directed (Cardillo, 2009).

Join a Professional Organization

Become a member of a professional organization. Most have student membership rates, so you can get involved while in school. Reading the publications that are sent to you will help keep you informed about new or changing aspects related to your profession. Membership also provides an opportunity to develop a network of professional peers with whom you can share information and best practices, discuss ideas and exchange information, and continue your personal and professional development. Once you have become licensed, you are required to attend continuing education programs, seminars, and conferences, and many professional organizations offer these at reduced costs to members. Should you choose to take an active role in the organization, you will have opportunities to develop your leadership and professional writing and speaking skills as well.

Professionalism Isn’t Just One Thing

Professionalism encompasses many things. How you look, act, speak, and what you say will determine how well you are received by patients, colleagues, and administrators. Finishing your program and passing your licensing exam allow you to become a professional. Understanding and practicing all aspects of professionalism as a student will put you ahead of the game and will help you develop self-respect, self-satisfaction, and confidence. It will also help you and your entire profession gain more recognition, respect, and opportunities. A professional attitude, appearance, demeanor, and behavior will help you to be the best at what you do.

References:
Gokenbach, V. (2012) Professionalism in nursing: What does it really mean? *Nurse Together*. (Note: This article is no longer available.)