The professional status of dental hygiene

Bernard Gauthier, Ph.D.
October 3rd, 2013

Key Topics
– Defining professions
– Who decides?
– Implications
– Taking action

Outline

Defining "Professions"
4 approaches to ponder...

Defining "Professions"

Ethical Approach
– Roots in Greek philosophy of stoicism
– Professions as "professing" to do the right thing
– Seeking virtue, not fame or fortune
– Avoiding strong emotions
– Remaining detached

Ethical Approach, Part II
– Education in Medieval European universities
– Classical curriculum
– Christian ethos of calling and service to the public
– Examinations to enter a program or to prove competence on exit
– Expert authority
Defining "Professions"

To be a professional one must...

- Obtain the right education, the right skills
- Profess to do the right thing
- Cultivate the right values
- Live by those high standards

- These are the roots of professional status...
- But a very tall order

Defining "Professions"

The Checklist...

- A profession involves a skill based on theoretical knowledge.
- The skill requires extensive and intensive training and education.
- The professional must demonstrate competence by passing a test.
- The profession is organized and it is represented by associations of distinctive character.
- Integrity is maintained by adherence to a code of conduct.
- Professional service is altruistic.

The Checklist Approach

More inclusive but perhaps not as useful...

The professional assumes responsibility for the affairs of others.
- Professional service is indispensable for the public good.
- Professionals are licensed, so their work is sanctioned by the community.
- Professionals are independent practitioners, serving individual clients.
- They have a fiduciary relationship toward their clients.
- They do their best to serve their clients impartially without regard to any special relationship.
- They are compensated by fee or fixed charge.

Professionals are highly loyal to their colleagues.
- They regularly contribute to professional development.
- Their prestige is based on guaranteed service.
- They use individual judgment in applying principles to concrete problems.
- The work is not manual.
- Profits do not depend on capital.
- Professional status is widely recognized.

Kultgen, 1988

These are the acts of profession — the promises made by physicians to their patients and to their communities that they will use their expert authority wisely, and will not abuse it for the sake of money or power.

Latham, 2000, p. 369
The Ideology Approach

Professions as “a mystification which unconsciously obscures real social structures and relations”

“The Parsonian model of professionalism was torn apart by critical scholarship in the 1960s and 1970s... the Parsonian view had ignored the exploitative actions of professional monopolists, who were in fact hungry not merely for status but also for both money and power... it had ignored the actual failure of professional institutions to guarantee the quality of their members' work.”

Latham, 2000, p. 365

The Cultural Approach

Professions as cultural communities

“I see professionalization as the process by which producers of special services sought to constitute and control a market for their expertise. Because marketable expertise is a crucial element in the structure of modern inequality, professionalization appears also as a collective assertion of special social status and as a collective process of upward social mobility.”

Larson, 1977, p. xvi

Defining "Professions"

Why Professions First Emerged...

– “The immediate motive was the desire for social intercourse with those who were doing the same work and facing the same problems. Association took the shape of dining clubs where ‘shop’ was talked”
  – Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1964, p. 301

– “There was a community of men engaged in the institutionalised study of medicine, albeit a small one, in each of the English universities, which allowed the emergence of an esprit de corps.”
  – O’Day, 2000, p. 189

“These uncommon occupations tend to become ‘real’ communities whose members share a relatively permanent affiliation, an identity, personal commitment, specific interests, and general loyalties.”

Larson, 1977, p. xviii
“Throughout their careers, identities can function as points of identification and attachment only because of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render ‘outside’, abjected.”

Hall, S., 1996, p. 5

Defined by the Appeal
- Common values
- Interaction
- Sharing
- Improving the craft
- Distinct identity

Culture is composed of:
- Knowledge and recipes
- Humanly fabricated tools
- Products of social action
- All of which may be drawn upon in the further conduct of social life

Hall, J.R., 1990, p. 20

Does dental hygiene meet this test?

Who decides...
... whether dental hygiene is a profession or not?
**Ethics Approach**
- Primarily members and their peers

"Parsons concluded, the professional project is successful only because professionals are motivated primarily by the desire for status and reputation — both among their peers and in society at large — rather than by the desire for money or power."

Latham, 2000, p. 364

---

**Ideology Approach**
- Primarily members public and state

"...it is ultimately through public opinion that professions establish the power that enables them to achieve legal protection."

Abbott, 1988, p. 60

---

**Checklist Approach**
- Primarily academics
  - But also anyone with a checklist

"Sociologists have not found a scheme of classification that results in generalizations with any significant predictive power. Instead, statements in the various theories take the form of deductions from ideal-typical models that match real occupations only approximately..."

Kultgen, 1988, pp. 68-59

---

**Cultural Approach**
- Members, their associations, educators
  - Ultimately, everyone
  - Fostering a desire to build and sustain a culture of professionalism within an occupation
  - Changing the meaning of the occupation

---

**Focus Group Findings**

Pharmacists and nurse practitioners on professionalism, identity and communication

---

**Over to you...**

What does professional status (or lack thereof) mean for dental hygienists today and in the future?
Methodology

- Six focus groups with Ontario pharmacists and nurse practitioners (n = 41)
  - Questions around professional identity and the communication practices of professional associations
  - Whether and how professional culture helps or hinders interprofessional communication
- Thematic analysis

Three Key Themes

- Anxiety
- Communication
- Identity

Anxiety

- “That (CP article) was silly. It was infuriating to read and I felt… I don’t know. I feel like physicians are… they’re scared.” - NP
- “I think a little bit because we’re so… we’re still unsure of where we are and what we do and the fact that there are still bills out there determining what our scope of practice is and what we can and can’t do. Then maybe it undermines people’s confidence in us because we’re still not sure as a profession what we can and can’t do.” - NP
- “I don’t know, because this one almost seems, like it’s insulting. It’s really insulting and it’s putting us down.” – Ph
- “If you’re bombarded by the negative stuff a few times in a row, you start to feel a little gun shy, like ‘ah geeze, you know, every time I call a doctor am I going to have to justify what I’m saying?’” Ph
- “I thought this, uhm, the collaboration one... I was just: where was the NP in that? No and that was intentional I’m sure. Totally intentional. I think that was a glaring absence, and consistent with their whole spiel against nurse practitioners.” – NP
- “... when you read the article they don’t even refer to pharmacists. They refer to specialists; they refer to everything else they collaborate with in the actual statistics.” – Ph

Identity and representation matter to professionals; it can be a source of great pride or real anxiety.
Implications

Communication by the Profession

- “One thing that RNAO has really stepped up in the last five or six years is to go after what's appropriate for the scope of regular nursing practice and extended nursing practice and nurse practitioners, so I applaud them for that. And I think it’s a really important point.” - NP

- “We've gotta ignore this crap and we've gotta do our own good storytelling to the government. That's... they've got the ultimate power and we've just gotta get the public on our side and get these stories out to the government.” - NP

The professional status of dental hygiene

Implications

Professions value efforts by their organizations to represent them positively. Some demand it.

Identity as a Profession

- “... most of the public representation, if they have a pharmacist, they have them counting pills on a tray. OK? And basically what Bill 179 will do is separate us from the physical product.” - Ph

- “I was really thinking that it has something to do with the kind of person who gets into pharmacy, frankly. I think, I think we're a type of person that has compassion and caring not a lot of being pushy...” - Ph

Knowledge and tools form a key part of professional identity.

So do shared values and history.
Taking Action

Ways to foster a shared sense of professionalism

Connect with others; be an ambassador

- “Groups of us got together and wrote papers to send in and a lot of nurse practitioners played an important role, including the professional association – NPAO – to really lobby for some of those changes...” – NP
- “Pharmacists should start bragging a bit more and doing what we’re supposed to do. I’ll often tell people as I’m helping them, that this is what your pharmacist is supposed to do. This is why you pay a fee. This is why we can do for you. This is exactly what your pharmacist should do for you no matter where you go.” – Ph

Association Executives

- Reach out to members, the public, the news media and governments
- Connect and collaborate with other professions
- Foster shared identity
- Foster collective action

Dental Hygiene Educators

- Integrate professionalism into the formal curriculum
- Integrate it into the informal curriculum
- Demonstrate professionalism
Integrate Professionalism

- “The school is regarded as a decisive middle term between the native and previously trained capacities of selected individuals and the emergence of the professional self, the identification of these individuals, by themselves and by society, as medical doctors” (Merton et al., 1957, p. viii).

- “... we can see how (schooling) also creates the foundation for a strong sense of occupational community. First, all who enter have aspired to that occupation and have chosen in advance to undertake any special course or examination for admission to training. Second, students are trained in batches or cohorts... Third, they are separated from other students in other schools of the university.”

  – Freidson, 2001, pp. 100-101

Closing Thoughts

About professions as cultural communities

Remember...

- Meaning must be continually built up and repaired. It is fluid, not fixed.
- Identity is a “moveable feast” (Hall, Hell and McGrew, 1992, p. 277).
- Success begins when members share a genuine desire for a strong professional identity and for a profession whose meaning is positive and valued.

Thank you

- Questions?

- Contact:
  - Bernard Gauthier, Ph.D.
  - Professor and Program Coordinator
  - Bachelor of Public Relations Program
  - Conestoga College
  - bgauthier@conestogac.on.ca