One Christmas vacation during college, a local clothing store, desperate for holiday help, hired me to sell men’s furnishings. During my two-week stint, I learned all I wanted to know at that time about belts, wallets and ties. Like the full-time salesmen, I was paid partly by salary and partly by commission. I quickly discovered that the main topic of conversation among the regulars was not the latest tie fashion or how to please the customer but rather “How much you got rung up so far?” I grew disenchanted with this narrow view of the job and vowed that my eventual full-time profession would travel beyond the myopic bounds of “how much you got rung up.”

Medicine seemed like a fit. Chiseled by long years of education and training, doctors were guardians of a specialized body of knowledge. Although clearly beneficiaries of impressive earning power, doctors seemed respected in their communities for reasons beyond wealth. And the ultimate goal of their work was to help others. Physicians seemed like the quintessential professionals.

Yet as I got further into my medical training, it became clear that “professional” was a word that carried a sackful of meanings and not just a little baggage. Yet during the course of a medical career, many things challenge our ability to maintain such high standards. Fatigue after endless nights on call tests our commitment to putting patients first. Potential consequences of professional failures threaten our resolve to maintain accountability. The daily tedium of paperwork and minor annoyances may push our intent to pursue continued learning out the back door. And with more and more doctors being employees of large corporations, duty can get redefined as fulfilling a clause in a contract.

So perhaps professionalism “ain’t what it used to be.” Are my professional standards today the same as those of the five internists I joined in 1977? Are they the same now that I work for a large organization? Are they the same as those of the solo practitioner in rural Minnesota? Will my commitment to professionalism go up in flames if I burn out?

Although there may be nuanced differences in the way each of us perceives professionalism, I think the core values remain static. University of St. Thomas professor Robert Kennedy in his paper “The Professionalization of Work” contended that “the relationship between professionals and those they serve is not a transaction … but rather a transformative encounter.” Sir William Osler said a professional was characterized by his “love of humanity associated with the love of his craft.” I think a medical professional takes ownership of the care of his patients, faithfully and consistently applying the finely honed tools of his craft to transform those patients.

And if we physicians embrace this concept, how much we “got rung up” will take care of itself. MM

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