



Military Medical Professionalism

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Introduction

Assessing professionalism can be challenging. In the military medical setting, assessment can be even more difficult when balancing the assessment of the patients needs matched secondly, if not equally, with the needs of the Armed Forces. In practising medicine in austere environments, military medical staff must protect themselves and their patients, with lethal force if needed, which can be an ethical dilemma.

Background

The British Army has developed a set of values and standards that should be followed by all personnel, whether medical or non-medical. The values and standards are taught during initial military training and refreshed annually. They underpin day to day activity, both on and off duty.

Values of the British Army ¹

Courage

- Physical and moral courage, including defence of self, and patients, if needed

Discipline

- This is not only self-control but also effective management of the team

Respect for others

- Respecting all members of the team equally and our patients best interests

Integrity

- Honesty is important for others with whom we work and for patient-centered care

Loyalty

- This instils team cohesion, both at the smaller team level and organisational level

Selfless commitment

- Putting others before ourselves, again tying in with patient-centred care

Standards of the British Army ¹

Lawful actions

- Undertake all duties within the scope of the law, both local and international

Acceptable behaviour

- All activity, on and off duty, should be acceptable

Professional

- All activity must be professional at all times and ties all of the *values and standards* together

GMC Duties of a Doctor ²

Knowledge, skills and performance

- Developing and maintaining performance and applying knowledge to practice

Safety and quality

- Protecting patients, responding to risk, acknowledging your own health needs

Communication, partnership and teamwork

- Communicating effectively, working collaboratively with colleagues, teaching and supporting others when necessary

Maintaining trust

- Show respect for patients, act with honesty and integrity at all times

Method

Qualitative interviews were used to scope the views of the military staff within Dhekelia Medical Centre, a British Forces overseas base which provides medical care for Service Personnel and their dependents. Military staff with a range in rank and clinical experience were asked "How do we assess professionalism?" This open-ended question then allowed for a conversation to unfold about professionalism in the military environment. Respondents included combat medical technicians, registered nurses, dispensing pharmacy technicians, junior doctors, senior doctors and managerial staff. Military personnel included in the research numbered 22 (n=22) and their rank ranged from Lance Corporal to Major with varying experience.

Results

All respondents cited the British Army values and standards as the guiding principles of their day to day practise of military medicine. Almost half of the respondents (n=10) had deployed to high-threat environments where they had been expected to use lethal force to protect themselves and their patients. All found the medical ethical principle of 'do no harm' difficult when relating to self-defence with lethal force if needed. A quarter of the respondents (n=5) had been serving for less than two years – their use of the values and standards were confined to peacetime roles. In terms of assessing professionalism, all respondents identified that they would act within the values and standards of the British Army in conjunction with the code of practice of their own regulatory body. Combat medical technicians do not have a regulatory body, so their only handrail is the values and standards outlined above.

The Code of the NMC ³

Prioritise people

- Put the interests of the patients first and uphold their dignity

Practise effectively

- Communicate clearly, maintain professional development and work co-operatively

Preserve safety

- Recognise own competence, be open and honest

Promote professionalism and trust

- Uphold the reputations of the profession and provide leadership to others



"Jack of all trades"

Depicting the challenge of providing patient care whilst embracing the values and standards of the British Army

Conclusion

The values and standards of the British Army are a useful handrail to direct our military professional activity, which must be done in conjunction with providing patient-centered care. It is a challenge, but it is this challenge that motivates and energises military medical personnel to continue in their role.

References

