

President's blog

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Professionalism in the age of the smart phone

In my five years as a consultant I've had some exposure to management and leadership 'speak.' I've had 'high level' discussions, scoffed at the notion of 'reaching out,' and recently guffawed at having a 'touch-point,' AKA a meeting. One of the essential concepts I've learned from this new language is that successfully managing people is much like good parenting (which I aspire to daily and occasionally achieve).

The essence of good parenting is positive reinforcement, gently coaxing the right behaviour, and if you're really excelling, getting the child to think of the idea themselves – or at least think they got to the correct idea by themselves! Developing empathy and being able to see conflicts from the child's point of view are also key to parenting; this includes understanding that there is always a minimum of two sides to every story. Viewing a situation from only what you see (e.g. who snatched what?) rarely allows for even judgement.

I was reminded of this when reading an article in the media at the beginning of the year – during the January slow news month. As a specialty we were in hot water as it was reported that an anaesthetist had used their cell phone for personal use during work time. The office team and I had been aware something was brewing as an eagle-eyed colleague had alerted me to an advertisement in Neighbourly in which someone had put a call out, wishing to speak to women who had undergone a caesarean birth whilst awake and who had seen their anaesthetist use their cell phone during their procedure.

Reporting of this event sparked widespread chat on Facebook and Twitter about its appropriateness. I was interested in how many people were happy to make comments based on minimal information – in contrast, my initial thought was how that could have been me! The story led to robust and interesting discussions at work and around the dinner table. One will never know the exact circumstances, but they span the full gamut of an exhausted anaesthetist who finally remembered in the first quiet five minutes of their long day that he needed to sort out tennis tickets before a deadline, through to someone who was attempting to distract, amuse and entertain an anxious couple awaiting their baby's arrival, to someone who had emotionally disengaged and not really considered the consequences of being seen and heard to be engaging in events outside the operating room.

Regardless of exactly how the scenario played out, it is always good to be reminded of the underlying Professionalism that marks our occupation as a true profession. As vocationally registered Specialist Anaesthetists, we are in fact, bound by multiple codes of conduct to assist us in remembering what Professionalism is. The Medical Council of New Zealand dedicates an entire book to the subject. In 2017 our College published a 36-page document titled, "Supporting Anaesthetists' Professionalism and Performance - A guide for clinicians." Also, the Can Meds Framework that ANZCA's curriculum is based on has Medical Expert in the centre and Professional as one of the six flower petals. The NZSA also has a code of conduct that is integral to the relationship between the NZSA and its members. The New Zealand Medication Association has produced a guide called 'Social Media and the Medical Profession' and of course they publish the NZMA Code of Ethics.

So we have a multitude of documents to support and underpin our Professional behaviours. However, real life sometimes gets in the way; it can be difficult not to lose your cool with a patient or fellow staff member who, for whatever reason, rattles your cage. Perhaps you didn't sleep well, the kids have been ill, or there are other, more pressing and emotionally draining life events taking place. Hopefully most of us work in forgiving environments, where there is space for reflection, apologies and forgiveness when necessary. It's not uncommon for me to have cause to apologise to my children, and certainly when mistakes crop up in our long term on call roster which require me saying sorry regularly to almost the entire department! But it can be hard to swallow my pride, 'reach-out' and mea culpa when I've really transgressed. A humbling moment, but one that can demonstrate true professionalism.

In the meantime, 'booking my tennis tickets' has entered the NZ anaesthesia vernacular – although I'm not sure 'chatting with Harvey Norman' will go the same way. Cellular phones are now such an integrated part of hospital communication that many of us have done away with the home landlines, and pagers are becoming obsolete. However, the intrusion of work into life and life into work can blur the lines between what is appropriate when, and what isn't. Sometimes I get it wrong.

Nga mihi

Kathryn