Reviewer's report

Title: Medical Student Professionalism Narratives: A Thematic Analysis and Interdisciplinary Comparative Investigation

Version: 1 Date: 9 April 2011

Reviewer: Orit Karnieli-Miller

Reviewer's report:

Dear editor and authors,

This is an interesting paper that has done a unique analysis using a newly developed qualitative analysis themes developed in Internal Medicine, and examining its relevancy in Emergency Medicine (EM) professionalism narratives. This is important due to the growing use of professionalism narratives in teaching professionalism, and the need to further explore and understand their use.

This study adds some needed information and allows the reader to better understand students experiences and perspectives within EM. In order to further improve this paper I have made a few suggestions below (in their order of appearance). My biggest concern is the need to clarify the new themes identified, when I think that there is one new theme (negative attitudes toward patients (cynicism/preconceived notions), while the two others identified are not themes, but rather topics of major relevance – misuse of ED and pain management/drug relief). I will discuss this in more detail within specific comments.

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. The original thematic analysis you compared your findings with focused on identifying the main themes that played a significant role in the students’ learning about professionalism and professional values in their day-to-day work environment. We used more general descriptions of the type of value/behavior observed (e.g., respect, communication, etc.). These are general descriptions that may address various content areas. What you have done in two of the new themes (appropriate use of the ED, pain management/drug seeking behavior) was address their content, and in the third (attitudes towards patients (cynicism/preconceived notions)) address the value and behavior. This is why you could more easily fit the first two in the original themes. I suggest refereeing to these in this manner – as two major content areas, and one new theme. The new theme, the cynicism, seems like an interesting theme worth adding to the lexicon, as it is not specific to one type of population.

Minor Essential Revisions

2. Methods – this section is clear and helpful. I would suggest addressing the issue of the manner in which you ensured anonymity, if all messages were immediately accessed by the students. In Indiana University that head of the clerkship ensures them before posting.
3. You can refer the readers to the erratum published in Jan. 2011 with the correct numbers found at [http://links.lww.com/ACADMED/A37](http://links.lww.com/ACADMED/A37) instead of the personal communication.

4. Perhaps some of the themes that are relevant to the topic of drug seeking were about trust and mistrust in patient care? If this is the case it can be addressed that way…

5. I suggest thinking and elaborating the discussion of the facts that fewer students in EM focused on narratives about their teaching and learning; the fact that even though they noticed many attitudes of cynicism they did not experience that themselves; and the fact that they did not mention their peers as a role model. I find these differences interesting = perhaps they are related to the clerkship and the emergency nature of the department, or perhaps to the schools atmosphere?

Discretionary Revisions

6. Abstract - consider revising the results section to indicate the one new theme and two topics of interest.

7. Background – consider adding some references and elaborating on other papers comparing professionalism aspects in different departments.

8. Results: Consider revising the title descriptive data analysis – as these are descriptive data findings.

9. Table 1 and 2 are important and clear, however, I suggest briefly presenting and describing the findings. It is unclear whether you only address those that are somewhat different or new, or ???.

10. You mentioned an important issue concerning the “…numerous situations where physicians employed various strategies, both professional and otherwise, to approach these patients.” I think that if you are focused on understanding EM professionalism topics (content areas), you should be encouraged to broaden the descriptions of these type of actions that were found to be mentioned – both as professional and as unprofessional. This may be done in your next paper # concerning this point, I don’t think you can address this in this paper but it could have been interesting to see what contents are relevant in which type of theme: e.g., pain management – in handling difficult conversations in EM, and breaking bad news in IM.

11. Discussion - Perhaps the low numbers of teaching and learning experiences were related to the fact that there were a few ED departments that had residents? If my understanding is true, you can mention it in limitations. If it is not true I suggest revising this sentence within the method section.

There are a few typo/editing mistakes that should be revised:

12. Add spaces before the parenthesis in the paragraph before the results.

13. Please explain the acronym EMS (p.10) when you first use it.

14. P.10, there is a number missing when the interns are mentioned (probably
0.5)
15. p. 14. “…described incidents of involves cynicism, skepticism, and preconceived notions of patients and situations before any assessment.”
16. P. 15 please check, both the first paragraph and the quotation (e.g. first-second sentence).

I believe this is an interesting and relevant paper that with the suggested comments can become an important piece for medical educators and all those that are the students day-to-day role models.

I recommend accepting this paper following the revisions suggested.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I may have a non-financial interest in this paper due to the authors use of a thematic analysis developed by our group.