

dear residents

Reimagining Professionalism

Dec. 14, 2021

Dear Residents,

I have been thinking a great deal about **professionalism** lately. It is a word we hear often, one that appears in evaluations, policies, and expectations, yet it is also one of the most personal and morally charged aspects of becoming a physician. How we define it matters. How we live it matters even more.

For generations, professionalism in medicine was closely tied to ideals of self-sacrifice. To be a good doctor meant putting patients first, often at great personal cost. Long hours, missed family events, physical exhaustion, and emotional depletion were quietly framed as signs of commitment. Many of your teachers trained in that era. Some still carry its scars with pride, others with quiet regret.

Your generation is reshaping this story. You enter medicine in a different world - one marked by accelerating complexity, administrative burden, digital overload, and the very real visibility of burnout. You have also named, clearly and without apology, the importance of [work-life harmony](#), boundaries, mental health, and sustainability. At times, this has been misinterpreted as a retreat from altruism. I do not see it that way.

I see it as an attempt to **save altruism from collapse**.

Altruism that consumes the physician is not noble in the long run. It is fragile. Sustainable care of patients requires sustainable care of the clinician. Sleep is not a weakness. Boundaries are not abandonment. Asking for help is not failure. These are the foundations of ethical reliability over a lifetime of practice.

Organizational psychologist **Adam Grant**, in his book [Give and Take](#), describes the power and the peril of altruism. He shows that “givers” often bring out the best in teams and organizations and, over time, **many of the most successful people are generous rather than transactional**. But he also cautions that unguarded giving can be fragile, even self-defeating, when it turns into chronic self-neglect. His solution is not to give less, but to be what he calls “otherish” or “giverish” - deeply invested in others *and* appropriately protective of one’s own limits. That balance feels especially relevant to medicine today.

I also worry about how the word *professionalism* is increasingly used in modern health care systems. More and more, it has become entangled with **compliance** - with mandatory trainings, modules, documentation requirements, inbox management, and administrative obligations that accumulate quietly but relentlessly. Each new requirement arrives with a reasonable justification. Very few ever leave. The list only grows.

Philosopher and anthropologist [David Graeber](#) once called this the modern “utopia of rules,” a world where institutions promise efficiency but often create procedural overload instead. In medicine, that overload lands

disproportionately on trainees. When professionalism is reduced to completing every task on an ever-expanding checklist, it risks losing its moral meaning and becoming something closer to **bureaucratic obedience**.

There is another tension embedded here. We assess *your* professionalism with great scrutiny: your punctuality, responsiveness, documentation, and behavior. But we rarely ask, with equal seriousness, about the **professionalism of our institutions themselves**. Is it professional for a system to continuously add responsibilities without retiring others? Is it professional to teach wellness while eroding the time and mental space needed to practice it? Is it professional to speak of balance while structurally rewarding only overextension?

These are uncomfortable questions. They are also necessary ones.

You are developing your professional identity at the intersection of three powerful obligations: duty to patients, duty to the institution, and duty to yourself. At times, these align beautifully. At other times, they compete. When that happens, your task is not blind endurance. It is ethical navigation. It is asking: *What is the most responsible action I can take in conditions of real human limits?*

That, to me, is the heart of modern medical professionalism.

Professionalism today is not silent self-erasure. It is the disciplined practice of responsibility in a world of constraint. It is showing up for patients with skill and compassion. It is caring for one another as colleagues. It is honoring your own humanity so that you can remain trustworthy for the long haul. And increasingly, it also means having the moral courage to help shape better systems, not just survive within imperfect ones.

You are inheriting a profession in transition. You are also helping to redefine it. I want you to know that we see this struggle, that we take it seriously, and that your insistence on sustainability is not a moral failure. It is, in many ways, a moral advance.

Medicine still needs altruism. Deeply. But it now also needs wisdom about limits. My hope is that you will help us build a culture where both can coexist with integrity.

With respect and gratitude for all that you carry,

Dino Kazi