Medical Students Cross The Line

From Facebook to YouTube to personal blogs, future doctors are crossing the line—and getting in trouble, a recent Associated Press article reports.

A new study surveying medical school deans finds that deans are aware of medical students posting unprofessional content online, such as photos of drug paraphernalia and violations of patient privacy. According to the survey, actions such as this have resulted in warnings, others have been expelled.

Through the survey, a handful of examples of worrisome, unprofessional conduct by medical students were cited.

In one, a student posted identifying patient details on Facebook. Another requested an inappropriate friendship with a patient on the site. Others used profanity, deans say.

"The number we found was higher than we expected," says Dr. Katherine Chretien of the Washington, D.C., VA Medical Center, the study's lead author. "And these are the incidents that made it to the attention of the deans. This is the tip of the iceberg."

However, most deans say their schools are aware of this problem, but haven’t yet come up with policies to help students figure out what's allowed online and what can get them kicked out of medical school. The study, which is published in the Journal of the American Medical Association found 47 of 78 medical school deans who responded to a survey knew of incidents of online unprofessional conduct. However, policies covering the behavior were reported by only 38 percent who answered that question.

A quick search of YouTube finds numerous videos posted by medical students, from harmless musical numbers to a prank with what appears to be a dead body. There's no way to tell whether the cadaver prank is real and it wasn't part of the study, but real or staged, it doesn't reflect well on the medical profession, Chretien says.

"I watched it and I definitely cringed," she admits. "Disrepect for cadavers is one thing, but filming it and putting it on YouTube is another. It undermines the credibility of our profession."

The incidents were reported most often by other students or doctors in residency programs, indicating trainees are policing themselves. Most offenders received informal warnings. The deans also reported three dismissals.

On the other hand, why should future doctors and surgeons be held more accountable for these actions than their peers in other professions?

According to Anastasia Goodstein, a San Franciso-based marketing expert who tracks youth trends on her Ypulse website, medical students are not different from other young adults. This generation that first embraced social networking still considers Facebook merely a way to connect with friends.

"Now they're waking up to the reality of older people and people with authority over them, like deans, seeing their Facebook pages," Goodstein says.

And many young adults don't appreciate that an Internet prank can bounce back years later, says Susan Barnes of the Lab for Social Computing at the Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, N.Y.

"Are they going to be able to live it down when they're 50 and a well-known surgeon? Or is it going to come back to haunt them?" Barnes says.

As far as Chretien is concerned, medical school should address online professionalism in classes and develop policies for the digital age.

Bawdiness among medical students far precedes the Internet, Chretien acknowledged. The now-defunct Pithotomy Club of Johns Hopkins Medical School, for example, made a tradition of racy skits and songs skewering professors for nearly 100 years.

"In the past, these weren't broadcast on the Internet. Now it's up for public consumption," Chretien says.

The Association of American Medical Colleges helped distribute the survey in the spring. The researchers invited deans of 130 schools to take it, and 78 responded.

Source: The Associated Press

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