Electronic Mail and Professionalism: Perceptions & Practices

Background

- Electronic mail, or e-mail, is an essential method of communication within medical education settings.
- Professionalism is a standard component of undergraduate and graduate medical education curricula. While there is a growing body of literature focused on provider to patient communication and studies involving social media, relatively little research exists on e-mail practices and professional behaviors.
- The purpose of this study was to identify and examine habits, perceptions, and expectations related to e-mail and professionalism in order to inform recommendations in an interdisciplinary academic medical setting.
- A 36 item survey was created. The anonymous survey tool contained demographic questions as well as items designed to evaluate perceptions and personal practices related to e-mail use in professional settings.
- The survey was approved by the Institutional Review Board and distributed via e-mail to faculty, trainees, and students within the School of Medicine and School of Nursing.
- All differences between groups were analyzed using chi square analysis.

Methods

- 360 surveys were analyzed with 66% of respondents reporting that e-mail practices “somewhat” or “very much” affected professional reputation.
- There were no statistically significant differences regarding perceptions around response times or e-mail practices affecting professional reputation for age, gender, and ethnicity.
- 73% of respondents perceived that their level of professionalism was in line with peers.
- Most individuals were not aware of any institutional guidelines.
- The most unprofessional e-mail habits reported were: no/slow responses, grammar/spelling issues, and the use of emoticons.
- Students and faculty reported similar behaviors regarding how many e-mail messages are ignored.

Results

- Comparison of responses between students (N = 144) and faculty (N = 144). Note, those identifying themselves as being in a "staff" or other role (i.e. not student, not faculty) (N = 35) were excluded from this analysis.

Discussion

While professionalism is emphasized throughout medical education, very little training occurs specific to e-mail communication. There is a paucity of research on e-mail communication among medical professionals. This is one of the first studies to directly assess the e-mail habits of an interdisciplinary group of students and faculty. Our study reveals a perceived connection between professionalism and e-mail, while simultaneously suggesting certain unprofessional habits exist without institutional guidance. Further research is needed with the goal to standardize recommendations for e-mail communication strategies.

References

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