WHAT DOES Professionalism in the Sleep Field LOOK LIKE?

By Kate Jacobson
Professionalism can mean many things to many people. For some, the thought of being professional conjures up images of business suits, strong handshakes and important meetings. But for those in the medical field—especially those working in sleep medicine—the idea of professionalism can seem a bit more abstract.

Many medical researchers have sought to identify what exactly professionalism means to those in medicine. According to a 2018 report by the Royal College of Physicians, medical professionalism is not only a means for those in medicine to do good by their patients; it’s a way to support joy and satisfaction in a career. Helping identify areas of improvement for professionalism not only enhance the quality of care for a patient, but also the quality of life for the practitioner as well.

First Impressions Matter

Before a patient even starts their sleep study, they’re already forming opinions about their experience—and a big factor is the look and feel of their environment they’re in. According to a study from Princeton University, it takes most people a tenth of a second to form an impression. That means the second they get to the sleep center, they’re taking note of everything from the curtains on the windows to the person sitting at the front desk.

Rui de Sousa, RPSGT, RST, a sleep technologist at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Center, said that’s why it’s so important to make the first impression matter. For those managing sleep centers, he said they should be cognizant of what their space says about their business. Are areas organized? Is the space relaxing? Is the equipment well kept?

“A professional look to the physical structure of the sleep lab goes a long way to foster a professional look and feel right from the onset,” he said.

Sleep technologists should take pride in not only the space around them by keeping it tidy, they should make sure they take pride in their appearance as well. For sleep centers looking to stand out, de Sousa recommends branded scrubs and nametags. For sleep technologists, he recommends looking clean and sharp.

“It’s easy to just keep putting on the same old pair of scrubs night in and night out,” he said. “Keep them looking fresh and new. Looking unkempt, rumpled or messy is a sure sign to the patient that your job (and their health) is not as important to you as it should be.”

Kimberly Trotter, MA, RPSGT—the administrative director for the University of California, San Francisco Adult and Pediatric Sleep Disorder Center—said it’s also about how those first interactions go. Those in the sleep lab should be cognizant of how they talk to a patient and how they talk to one another when patients are around.

“This goes for personal interactions as well as phone calls, emails and text messages,” she said. “It means setting a higher standard of behavior for all you encounter.”

Patience with Patients

Patients come from all walks of life, each with their own set of unique sleep needs. Trotter said with especially complex patients, this can be difficult for sleep technologists to manage. She said many aren’t trained on how to work with patients when they are new to the field, and often don’t know how to handle things that don’t go smoothly.

From frustrating non-compliance issues to challenging personalities, it can be hard to interact with patients while keeping cool. Sleep technologists need to be cognizant that they are allies in helping a patient with their sleep issues, and that being compassionate can help turn a sour relationship into a good one.

“Professionalism means setting a high standard of behavior to all you encounter, including patients and family members,” Trotter said. “It influences the way you act with the patient. Having understanding and compassion for that patient as a person, and not just another OSA patient, is meaningful to the patient and can help them trust and relax during a sleep study or a follow up. It means being a partner in their care plan.”

Sarah Brennecka, BA, RPSGT, said for sleep technologists struggling with frustrating patients should put themselves in their patient’s shoes. While technologists are knowledgeable enough to identify problems and offer solutions to patients, it’s not always so black and white on the other side.

“I think it’s easy for technologists to forget how vulnerable this experience can be for a patient,” she said.

Brennecka, a manager for sleep and DME at Northwestern Medicine, said compassion and open communication can make the entire experience seem less intimidating and help build a positive relationship.
“Encouraging patients to share their ideas, concerns and expectations can help with the overall patient satisfaction,” she said.

**Social Media Strategies**

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And while social media can be a means for people to express themselves, those working in sleep medicine should be aware of what their posts say about their professionalism. Negative posts can impact the way colleagues, bosses and even possibly patients see technologists.

“They might make inappropriate posts that can be viewed by not only their friends, but others in the field, including patients,” Trotter said. “I stick to the rule to only submit posts that I wouldn’t mind seeing on the news. Technologists, especially managers, might also consider if they want to interact with their staff on social media, or if that creates an undermining level of familiarity. There is a fine line between being a personable and approachable manager, and losing the respect of those you manage.”

De Sousa echoed Trotter’s concerns. It is easy to post things others might find inappropriate, and sleep technologists need to realize the consequences of a bad post.

“One has to be mindful of the traps of responding to questions or comments in anger or thoughtlessness,” he said. “Keeping conversations online respectful will help maintain the professional façade.”

Sleep technologists—along with anyone who works with patients in any way—must also be wary of posting information about their patients. Posting information about a patient could violate HIPAA. According to The Compliancy Group—a company aimed at helping organizations become HIPAA compliant—such posts revealing sensitive information can be costly for a sleep center, both financially and professionally.

Social media posts should never include any information that could identify a patient or their medical records. To avoid any HIPAA violations, managers should outline a social media policy within their department and share that with their employees.

Just as much as social media can be a negative tool, it can also be a positive one to promote professionalism. Brennecka said social media is a great tool for people looking to connect on their shared experiences, including the trials and tribulations of being a sleep technologist. It can also be a tool to make meaningful connections with potential patients and others in the industry.

“Through social media sites, we can strengthen professional relationships with people outside the company,” she said. “These relationships can lead to opportunities that would otherwise not have been available.”

Having a policy in place allows for constructive social engagement and creates clear expectations of what to avoid.

“Social media can be a powerful tool if used correctly,” de Sousa said.

**Self-Care and Development Is Important, Too**

Being professional is more than just how you present yourself to the world. In order for sleep technologists to be their best, they need to feel their best, too.

Part of that includes taking care of your body and mind. Sleep technologists often work overnight shifts, which can be taxing on the body. Eating healthy, drinking lots of water and taking time for self-reflection—whether that’s through exercise, meditation or enjoying a hobby—helps people perform at higher levels when they’re on the clock.

There’s another important element sleep technologists shouldn’t ignore: The amount of sleep they are getting.

“Taking care of oneself is a constant struggle,” de Sousa said. “We have to be mindful of our mental and physical health. Stay well rested; treat your aches and pains. A happy technologist is a professional sleep technologist.”
Self-improvement is also an important aspect of self-care. Brennecke said technologists should aim to obtain professional credentials, as well as seek opportunities for continuing education in areas that interest them. Not only can these tools help technologists become experts in their field, it can help them move up internally as well.

"Being credentialed can translate to a higher salary," she said. "Credentials also serve as a confirmation that you are competent, motivated and qualified as an expert in your specialty."

**How Leaders Can Help Build Professionals**

Managers and industry veterans need to walk-the-talk when it comes to promoting professionalism—especially when it comes to training new sleep technologists. For many who are just starting their journey as technologists, their lack of professionalism stems from being unfamiliar with the field, not from unwillingness or inability.

Trotter said it starts from the top. Those in positions to model good behavior should, and those who have the tools to help others correct their behavior need to act as mentors.

"As a manager, I feel it is my responsibility to develop and coach my technologists and offer what I can in opportunities for continued learning, personal growth and development," she said. "Be the example of professionalism and continue coaching up your staff. Seek out learning opportunities for personal development and professionalism and make them available to your team."

Professionalism may mean a lot of things to different people, but for sleep technologists and their colleagues it comes down to two core principles: respect and trust.

"Being professional means taking care of yourself, as well as your peers, your patients and your profession," de Sousa said. "A culture of professionalism is not an isolated incident, nor does it occur in a vacuum. Cultivate the essential factors and an atmosphere of professional respect will usually be the outcome."