

# **The relationship between conscientiousness and professionalism**

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## **Introduction**

Early concerns about professionalism are a risk factor for later disciplinary proceedings. However, methods of measuring professionalism are subjective, occasional, and expensive, with low reliability and validity. A significant component of professionalism may be conscientiousness in carrying out routine tasks, and this has the potential to be measured in an objective and reliable way.

## **Methods**

We monitored undergraduate medical students' conscientiousness over the course of several academic years to construct a 'Conscientiousness Index'. Items contributing to the Index included completing essential administrative forms, attending compulsory teaching sessions and submitting assignments (unless excused), completion of class evaluations, submission of immunisation status, and so on. One point was awarded when each task was carried out. We compared the resulting Conscientiousness Index (CI) with two separate estimates of professionalism: one arising from staff and one estimated by peers. We also compared the Index with performance on measures of academic performance in a variety of domains.

## **Results**

The CI shows good discrimination and reliability. Statistically significant relationships were observed between the CI and staff and peer concerns about professionalism. Significant correlations were observed between CI scores and assessments of knowledge and skills, but not with existing formal measures of professionalism.

## **Conclusions**

The trait of conscientiousness is a significant component of the construct of professionalism in medical education. Its use is being explored in post graduate settings and other medical and dental schools. Measuring conscientiousness is simple and objective, and represents a significant component of professionalism. Issues may arise with regard to the acceptability of the Index with regard to students and medical professionals.

1. Finn G, Sawdon M, Clipsham L, McLachlan JC (2009) Peer estimates of professionalism correlate with low Conscientiousness Index scores. *Medical Education* **43**: 960-970.

2. McLachlan JC, Finn G, Macnaughton J (2009) The Conscientiousness Index: a novel tool for exploring students' professionalism. *Academic Medicine* 84: 559-565.