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Operationalizing Professionalism: A Course in Ethical Decision Making

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All U.S. medical schools require some medical ethics education and must now ensure that their graduates, residents, and faculty exhibit competence in the area of professionalism and professional medical ethics. However, there remain many challenges to implementing formal ethics and professionalism education into medical school curricula. Although the number of medical schools offering formal ethics education has increased, “significant variation in the content, method, and timing of ethics education suggests consensus about curricular content and pedagogic methods remains lacking” (Lehman et al., 2004). The faculty in the Center for Medical Ethics and Health Policy at Baylor College of Medicine has developed a rigorous conceptual framework for teaching professional medical ethics to medical students, residents, and practicing physicians. In this presentation, we will introduce this conceptual framework and offer a sample curriculum for first year medical students that can be used as a vehicle for exploring larger pedagogical concerns, such as: (1) achieving an appropriate balance between educating students about areas of ethical and legal consensus and exploring areas of ethical and legal controversy, (2) providing appropriate direction and guidance for analyzing difficult cases, (3) operationalizing the professional virtues in ethical decision making, (4) demonstrating the relevance of course materials to first year medical students’ professional development, and (5) evaluating student performance in the domains of ethics and professionalism.