In the 2011 Harveian Oration, British general practitioner Iona Heath traced the roots of the division of clinical medicine into generalists and specialists to the mid-19th century with the Medical Act of 1858. This resulted in the creation of what she describes as a single but dualistic profession with common initial training, equal status and useful reserves of mutual respect. Specialists and GPs, though sometimes perceived as opposites, are inextricably dependent on each others’ skills and, crucially, most are keenly aware of the extent of this interdependency.

Ideally generalist family physicians and their specialist colleagues are equal but different and complementary in which the generalist is portrayed as inferior. Much of this stems from the belief that students who choose to specialize are considered the experts on the evidence, but rather than patient-centred. Their recommendations are not always based on the highest-quality evidence and are overly reliant on expert opinion. Expert panelists are much more likely than “non-experts” (family physicians) to have conflicts of interest that might influence their recommendations and undermine their integrity.

If we scrutinize the medical literature closely, we see that the hidden curriculum extends well beyond medical school and into our lifelong continuing professional development (CPD). One important way that it does so is through traditional clinical practice guidelines (CPGs). Traditionally, CPG panels have been dominated by specialists who are considered the experts on the evidence, but over the past 2 decades some serious problems have been identified. Traditional CPGs tend to be disease-oriented rather than patient-centred. Their recommendations are not always based on the highest-quality evidence and are overly reliant on expert opinion. Expert panelists are much more likely than “non-experts” (family physicians) to have financial and other conflicts of interest that might influence their recommendations and undermine their integrity.

Over the past 3 years, Canadian Family Physician (CFP) has published a series of CPGs that demonstrate that family physicians working with others (including patients)

The hidden curriculum and continuing professional development for family physicians

Nicholas Pimlott MD CCFP FCFP, SCIENTIFIC EDITOR

Virtue can only flourish among equals.
Mary Wollstonecraft

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