

To: All IHS

From: Yvette Roubideaux, M.D., M.P.H.
Director

Date: January 23, 2010

Subject: Message from the Director – Professionalism

As we reflect on the new year, it is a time for gratitude for many things. Given the economic difficulties of so many people in these times, we cannot forget that we are lucky to have important resources such as friends, family, and, as employees of IHS, a job. Sometimes we forget that we are very fortunate to be employed, especially given unemployment rates in general, and the significant lack of jobs in our communities. None of us are entitled to the job we hold.

For many IHS employees, the position we hold is more than a job. It is meaningful in the context of our own lives, and in the hopes and dreams of the people we serve. I know this because I see and hear about the many dedicated employees we have in IHS who go above and beyond the call of duty to make sure our patients get the healthcare that they need.

However, I have reviewed the input received from staff in our Internal IHS Reform process and **there were many negative comments about the lack of professionalism of some of our staff.** These comments included: concerns about negative attitudes; problems with unprofessional behavior; unprofessional dress; conflicts between staff; problems with some not following rules, regulations, policies or expected responsibilities; poor quality work; lack of teamwork; failure to follow chain of command; politics and gossip in the workplace; allegations of racism and unfair treatment; time and attendance problems; entitlement or arrogance about a right to misbehave; ethics violations; and even complaints about use of alcohol or drugs on the job. I certainly hope that the numbers of staff who are doing these types of things are low, but it was mentioned so frequently in the comments that it seems to be a significant problem that needs to be addressed. My experience working in IHS is that most of our staff are caring and hard working and are positive members of the team. But as I read the comments and complaints from the input we received, I recognized some familiar problems and issues.

The purpose of this message is to share my perspectives on professionalism in the IHS. While I consider working for IHS to be a great privilege and an honor, I believe it also carries with it a significant obligation to do our work in a professional manner. **We owe it to our patients to conduct our**

work with the highest degree of professionalism. They should expect nothing less from us. We also owe the same respect to our coworkers.

I recently sent an email to all IHS staff about the importance of customer service. I talked about how we treat our patients and how we treat each other and how customer service needs to be a priority. I received hundreds of emails thanking me for bringing up this important topic. Many said they planned to review the message with their staff. Some told me of recent efforts in their facilities to improve customer service. And a few people let me know that they planned to improve their own individual efforts – I am so grateful for their honesty and their willingness to improve. However, customer service is only one component of professionalism.

Professionalism relates to how we perform as an individual in our job. It might relate to the specific type of position we hold, but also relates to the general way we go about our work. It is important to note that every job in IHS matters – all positions help us work towards our mission. **Professionalism applies to every job in our system.** We do this job in the context of a team of coworkers and it is our responsibility to be a good team player. That means respecting other employees, and respecting the organization enough to want to do the best job that we can. Remember, everyone in this organization represents this organization. And you all represent me as the Director in the job you do. What you do on a day to day basis reflects on the quality of what we do and the perception about the organization by others. Even what we do in our off hours also sometimes reflects on the organization, especially in small communities.

As the IHS Director, I am writing today to ask all our staff to conduct the business of our organization in the most professional manner possible. This includes professional dress, professional behavior, professional teamwork, and professional quality of our work. Our patients deserve the best we can give each day, despite the challenges we face. **I encourage all managers to have a conversation about professionalism and customer service with their staff and develop suggestions for improvement.** It is possible that some of our employees may not understand or may have not experienced professionalism in their lives or prior work and might need some constructive suggestions for how to improve their behavior at work. I would like managers to compliment those who conduct their work in a professional manner, and work with those who need to improve in this area.

Thank you for your help in improving and changing the IHS – I am grateful for all that you do to improve how we deliver healthcare to the patients we serve in the most professional manner possible.

Yvette Roubideaux, M.D., M.P.H.
Director