

# Is there such a thing as an indispensable skills profile to be a good doctor? “Life skills” as essential capabilities in the medico-forensic professions

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## Abstract

This writing aims to convey the essential nature and features of a cultural tool based on a set of skills and capabilities generally referred to as “life skills”, which allow for the proper management (in the medical and medical-forensic professional realms) of daily situations in an effective and rewarding fashion. Such a process is based on individual tools such as communication, problem solving, stress management, self-control, the ability to make timely decisions, empathy, creativity and the opportunity to work in a multidisciplinary setting. Life skills include everything the professional should rely on in order to minimize the risks of a professional error, through the acquisition of knowledge and behavioral traits which constitute the fundamental, experience-based starting point. The chief objective of this commentary is to outline the scope of a straightforward discussion by specifically defining such skills; that in turn will make it possible to identify all the technical issues to address during the medical-diagnostic assessment, also from a medico-legal perspective, in order to frame the residual life skills and evaluate the possibilities of recovery and any disabilities, based on observation and interactions with each patient aimed at weighing their psychophysical performance. *Clin Ter 2024; 175 (1):17-19 doi: 10.7417/CT.2024.5028*

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Life skills constitute a combination of life-acquired skills and psychosocial capabilities essential for establishing and managing a viable doctor-patient relationship (1). Life skills include a substantially wide range of skills, namely: a) effective communication, i.e. the ability to convey information clearly and respectfully, listen to others, ask appropriate questions and answer just as appropriately to all the various contingencies which may arise; b) problem-solving, meant as the ability to identify, analyze and plan solutions in a personalized way; c) critical thinking, intended as the ability to analyze and interpret information, evaluate sources

and ultimately make informed decisions; d) collaboration, i.e. the ability to engage in teamwork, manage conflicts and finally, achieve common objectives. The World Health Organization characterizes Life Skills as those skills and abilities that “enable individuals and groups to effectively deal with the challenges and everyday life situations” (2). Conflict management and resolution is an organic process constituting the fundamental scope of life skills application. Many of such skills have direct implications and repercussions in forensic professions such as judges/prosecutors, attorneys and forensic doctors. Such a scope of professional application is more relevant than ever, also in light of the very recent Italian reform of civil proceedings (the so-called “Cartabia” reform) (3), which has further strengthened and broadened the function and applicability of alternative dispute resolution tools, and increased the number of litigation proceedings for which mediation, arbitration or plea-bargaining is prescribed. By virtue of such dynamics, the ability to communicate effectively is a professional cornerstone for legal professionals who are charged with solving disputes. It is therefore of utmost importance to know how to stimulate and motivate all the parties involved, enabling them to express their opinions and feelings clearly and thoroughly respectfully towards their counterparts. Furthermore, the ability to listen carefully to others, relate to them and strive to understand their point of view is essential in order to foster create an environment where dialogue and mutual understanding can thrive, thus forming the bedrock of any mediation process (4). Other important life skills aimed at conflict management that have a bearing in mediation processes, in the legal and medicolegal settings, include the ability to solve problems effectively and sustainably, make informed decisions and manage personal emotions appropriately (5). For instance, the ability to find solutions to any given issue from scratch can help the parties involved to compromise and find common ground on which to solve their conflicts. Active listening plays a fundamental role at this stage, in that it creates a climate of trust and collaboration among all the parties involved, encouraging communication and mutual understanding. Concentrating steadily on the person who is

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speaking is necessary in order to eliminate any distractions; just as important is to avoid interruptions over the course of the conversation and to fully understand the message being conveyed, also by paying close attention to gesturing, facial expressions and overall demeanor of the person who is speaking, asking questions when needed to clarify any key points and gain relevant information as to the positions and expectations of all parties involved (6). The rephrasing of any given message can be significant, as well as occasionally repeating the words uttered by the speaker, in order to confirm one's understanding of what was said. In this way, everyone will feel they are being listened to and understood, thus building trust in the procedure itself. It will be necessary to respect silences and give the parties involved time to process information and freely express what they think in relation to their cultural level and emotional status (7). Such key elements are conducive to a climate of collaboration among all parties, which encourages communication and mutual understanding. Such a set of skills and attainments is uniquely relevant and must be researched without confining them to mere personal aptitudes, which are certainly not irrelevant, but which must still be based on objective technical knowledge. Life skills can be subdivided into different categories, including communication skills, problem-solving skills, (i.e. the ability to think creatively, analyze situations, weigh all options available and make informed decisions), time management skills, relationship skills, stress management, critical thinking, learning and self-motivation (8). Life skills are important because they help us develop and enhance our capacity for adaptation and resilience. Throughout our lives, we often find ourselves facing unexpected and difficult to manage situations and scenarios, e.g. job loss, illness or family loss. Life skills help us overcome such daunting challenges and find acceptable avenues to adapt. Developing life skills requires commitment and perseverance, as these are skills which entail a progressing pathway of learning and bettering oneself. In fact, recruitment agencies have been engaged more and more often more and more facing with life skills and competencies evaluation, even before job colloquial interviews. In the medicolegal realm, life skills are remarkably important because professionals who operate in this field must rely on the ability to manage highly emotional situations and communicate constructively with patients, family members and colleagues. Communication skills are essential for forensic doctors, who must be able to explain the determining factors and implications of any diagnosis or treatment to patients and their families in a straightforward and intelligible fashion. To that end, interacting effectively with other professionals with the same professional background, e.g. lawyers, judges and insurers is also highly relevant. Problem solving skills are just as important in the medicolegal field, where professionals must commit to analyzing the evidence from the standpoint of possible medical negligence, in order to assess consequences and damages also in terms of compensation. Furthermore, forensic doctors operating in hospital settings are required to make informed decisions regarding complex issues such as the maintenance or withdrawal of life-support treatments in patients in a vegetative state, albeit as part of a multidisciplinary setting. Time management skills are crucial for forensic doctors who must

be able to organize their activities in order to manage multiple cases at the same time and meet the deadlines associated with the legal proceedings trial. Stress management skills are equally important in the medicolegal field, where professionals may be exposed to emotionally demanding situations, such as the death of a patient, or the burden of handling highly complex cases. Such professionals need to be able to keep calm under pressure and adapt quickly to any setback or unexpected situation. Critical thinking skills are also essential in the medicolegal field, since forensic doctors must harness and make the most out of medical and legal skills. In light of all such dynamics, it is safe to say that life skills are a key element for building and maintaining a positive doctor-patient relationship, even when the therapeutic alliance unfolds in a medicolegal setting. It is worth stressing in this regards that doctors must bring themselves to actively listen to their patients, by airing their concerns, needs, expectations, objectives and priorities. Furthermore, the doctor must be able to show empathy and active interest in the patient's situation, managing the stress caused by such interactions and the emotional burden of such experiences, by adapting and modulating their responses on a case-by-case basis. Nurturing such skills is likely to result in substantially greater patient satisfaction and higher quality, more effective medical care, although it does need adequate application times, dedication and commitment. Among the most important life skills forensic doctors should possess, there certainly is the knowledge of laws and regulations, in addition to evidence gathering skills, communication skills, cross-examination skills, stress management and the ability to effectively interact and collaborate with other healthcare professionals, lawyers and judicial authorities. The ultimate goal is to ensure even-handed justice through a reliable, transparent procedure that enables judges to strike a fair balance based on *juxta alligata et probata* (that is delivering justice based on evidence "corroborated and presented" during the proceedings), whenever an out-of-court settlement cannot be achieved. Technology can be a greatly valuable tool for forensic doctors in their collaborations and interaction throughout the process. Communication platforms for instance can greatly facilitate the sharing of documents (through the many available and highly versatile document management software) and expedite project management. Furthermore, telemedicine-based approaches, which are becoming increasingly widespread in many clinical specialties (9,10), can enable forensic doctors to evaluate patients remotely, using videoconferencing technology, quickly and comfortably, without the need to physically travel. Data analysis software allows for the sharing of large amounts of information, but creative thinking and emotional intelligence are also needed to correctly direct health and judicial management toward effective solutions.. Simulation technologies, which can model and reproduce different scenarios and contingencies, and even test evidence-elaboration strategies and debriefing have great potential as well (11, 12garden 2015, moll).

Thus, the possibility of training students and professionals in the health and legal fields with respect to life skills is discussed, including evaluating the types adopted, along with different applicable approaches and with respect to the scope of application, as well as the various levels of effectiveness

and reliability In letteratura esistono infatti trattazioni circa la possibilità di formare studenti e professionisti dell'ambito sanitario e legale rispetto alle life skills, valutandone anche le tipologie adottate rispetto all'ambito di applicazione nonché l'efficacia e l'affidabilità (13-16griffin holland esge Cameron ). However, evidence-based guidelines for good practice should be formalized issued and validated in order to help with conduct and implementation (17. (buleon).

In thisFrom such a perspective, the introduction of courses in ethics, cost containment, socioeconomics, medico-legal issues, communication skills, research design, statistics, humanities, and critical review of medical literature is should be highly supported L'introduzione di corsi di ethics, cost containment, socioeconomics, medical-legal issues, communication skills, research design, statistics, humanities, and critical review of the medical literature (medio, raja18,19).

Of particular interest is the question of whether it is possible, and how much to what extent, to provide training *train* in skills that are more typically related to human and character aspects (i.e. where daily experience, including non-work experience, is crucial to the final outcome) than to *technical* skills aspects and attainments that, which can be acquired through study education, where daily experience, including non-work experience, is decisive in the outcome

Ciò che interessa in particolare è se sia possibile e quanto "formare" rispetto a doti più tipicamente riferite ad aspetti umani e caratteriali piuttosto che a competenze tecniche acquisibili con lo studio laddove l'esperienza quotidiana, anche extra lavorativa, è determinante nell'esito (shapiro20). These interactions may serve to further be valuable in terms of eroding the traditional "*silo*" model of residency training and to promote better foster more effective communication across specialties and subspecialties. The reality of clinical practice dictates that calls for the core curriculum elements to be inseparable from part and parcel of clinical knowledge and skills (medio18).

The topic introduced in this writing arises from the synergistic combination of personal and medical experience in a very sector-specific professional setting, but should also be viewed, more generally, as the starting point for young doctors to start enhancing their background and knowledge of their own cultural and behavioral heritage. Such a newly found state of awareness will make it possible to convey to future generations the set of technical-scientific, personal, social and ethical tools necessary to further the advancement of science and culture, which constitute the cornerstone of every healthcare profession.

#### Conflict of interest

The author declares that he has no conflict of interest regarding this manuscript.

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