

Update 80

Judging A Book By Its Cover: Patients' Preferences For Doctors' Appearance

Health care providers' attire has been moulded by tradition and fashion over centuries. The past decades have seen major changes to the health care workforce and to societal expectations that have led to changes in providers' choice of dress. One change is the increased proportion of females entering the professions with no traditionally defined "dress code." Another is the move away from medical paternalism, resulting in fewer providers choosing the traditional white coat.

Furthermore, just as fashion changes so may opinions amongst consumers. However, few studies have looked at clothing options other than white coats. Preferences may be determined by the familiar, so that if a health care provider wears a white coat this may become acceptable to the patient. Similarly, style of dress may depend on the work culture of an institution. Many health care providers adapt their styles to fit in with colleagues' expectations, whereas some attempt to stand out deliberately. Others may dress in a way that they feel is acceptable to their patients.

The authors of a recent descriptive survey (1) documented the preferences of a range of patients within one hospital, with the aim of informing doctors' practice.

The survey's participants included 202 inpatients and 249 outpatients at a tertiary level hospital, New Zealand (mean age 55.9 years). The main outcome measure was the ranking of patients' opinions of photographs showing doctors wearing different dress styles. A five point Likert scale was used to measure patient comfort with particular items of appearance.

The authors report that patients preferred doctors to wear semiformal attire, but the addition of a smiling face was even better. The next most preferred styles were semiformal without a smile, followed by white coat, formal suit, jeans, and casual dress. Patients were more comfortable with conservative items of clothing, such as long sleeves, covered shoes, and dress trousers or skirts than with less conservative items such as facial piercing, short tops, and earrings on men. Many less conservative items such as jeans were still acceptable to most patients. Most patients preferred to be called by their first name, to be introduced to a doctor by full name and title, and to see the doctor's name badge worn at the breast pocket. Older patients had more conservative preferences.

The authors conclude,

"Patients prefer doctors to dress in a semiformal style, but when accompanied by a smiling face it is even better, suggesting a friendly manner may be more important than sartorial styleAlthough previous studies have shown that patients prefer doctors to wear white coats, we found that patients prefer a semiformal style of dress over formal suits and white coats. In line with previous studies, casual dress styles were less popular. This finding, and the association with age, suggests the beginnings of a trend away from patients preferring white coats. In general, patients prefer more conservative items of clothingMost patients prefer their doctor to call them by their first name but prefer doctors to introduce themselves using title and first and last names. Few patients prefer the most casual option of first name only or the most formal option of title and surname."

Reference:

- 1.) Lill MM, Wilkinson TJ. **Judging a book by its cover: descriptive survey of patients' preferences for doctors' appearance and mode of address.** BMJ. 2005;331:1524-7.