

Looks do matter: Patients' perspective

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Abstract

Objective: The aim of the study was to determine patients' preferred choice of pre-selected attire for physicians in the out-patient departments of urban hospitals and nursing homes. **Methodology:** A questionnaire along with the consent form was created. Questions included the respondents' name, age, gender and preference for a white coat. They also had to choose one of the pre-selected attires (casual, informal, formal and in-hospice dress) as their preferred dress code for doctors for both male and female separately. **Results:** Formal professional dress was the most desired attire for both male and female doctors, attributing to 42.4% and 40.9% respectively and this was found to be statistically significant ($p=0.002$). **Conclusion:** The physical appearance and dress code of the attending doctor does make an impression on the patients and their caregivers. White coats were strongly preferred with informal/formal attire.

Keywords: Physician dress, Patient preference.

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Introduction

In medical profession, the dress code of a physician is quite varied. The attire of a doctor should reflect certain level of professionalism and should also keep in mind patients' preferences. The white coat remains a powerful symbol of a doctor and was firmly established as the "doctors' uniform" by the 20th century. The white color was associated with purity and cleanliness of the physicians. The basis of practice of medicine depends on doctor-patient relationship and efforts should be made to build rapport to foster a partnership to provide patient-centered care. It has been established that for a good relationship and effective communication with the patients, a doctor's attire and

style of dressing plays a very important role [1-3]. However, there are conflicting literature findings regarding a doctors' dressing style. Some prefer to see their doctors in formal dress while others want to see doctors in a more casual outfit [4-6]. As there is paucity of Indian studies, this study was conducted among patients and their care givers visiting out-patient departments of urban hospitals and nursing homes to assess their preference for doctors' attire.

Material & Methods

A cross-sectional study was conducted among patients and their caregivers visiting a number of urban hospitals and nursing homes equipped with all the basic specialties and catering to local and nearby population from all socioeconomic strata of the society. A predesigned, semi-structured interview questionnaire was circulated among the patients and their caregivers through 'google forms' who agreed to participate in the study and the response was automatically recorded and saved once the person submitted the form. All participants were coherent adults (more than 18 years) from whom informed consent was obtained and non-duplication of the participants was ensured. The

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questionnaire consisted of respondent’s socio-demographic details, the out-patient department visited, the desire to see their doctor in white coat and the actual use of white coat by the attending doctor. The preferred gender of the treating doctor was also enquired. The respondents were further asked to choose the preferred dress code for their attending doctor. The attires were categorized as casual, informal professional, professional and in-hospice dress. These attires were to be worn with a white coat and were different for both male and female doctors. The attire for Male doctors included:

- *Casual- Jeans & T- shirt/ Pants with shirt not tucked-in and white coat
- * Informal Professional- Pants with shirt tucked-in, shoes and white coat
- * Formal professional- Pants with tucked-in shirt, tie, shoes and white coat
- * In- hospice dress- Scrubs and white coat

The attire for female doctors included:

- * Casual- Jeans & T- shirt/ long top/ kameez with white coat
- * Informal professional- Salwar suit with white coat
- * Formal professional- Sari and white coat
- * In-hospice dress- Scrubs and white coat

Data was collected by Google form and analyzed by appropriate statistical methods using SPSS (Statistical Packages for Social Sciences, version 21.0. Armonk, NY: IBM corp.). Item wise responses have been

categorized as frequency of occurrence with percentages and χ^2 test used to find association. A ‘p value’ of <0.05 was considered significant.

Results

There were 434 respondents to the google form but only 415 gave consent for the same and were finally enrolled in the study. Medicine was the most frequently visited outpatient department (31.1%) with maximum number of patients belonging to the age group of more than 45 years (38.1%); followed by the department of obstetrics and gynaecology (13.2%). It was observed that most of the patients or their relatives (54.9%) preferred a female doctor for their treatment. Though 88.7% of the respondents wanted their attending doctor to be wearing a white coat, only 60% actually found their doctors in white coat during consultation. Formal professional dress was the most desired attire for both male and female doctors, attributing to 42.4% and 40.9% respectively and this was found to be statistically significant (p=0.002). On correlating with the age of the respondents, formal professional dress code for male doctors was the most desired attire for ages group 18-25 years and age more than 45 years (~45%). For the formal attire for female doctors, majority of the respondents (48%) were in the age group of more than 45 years.

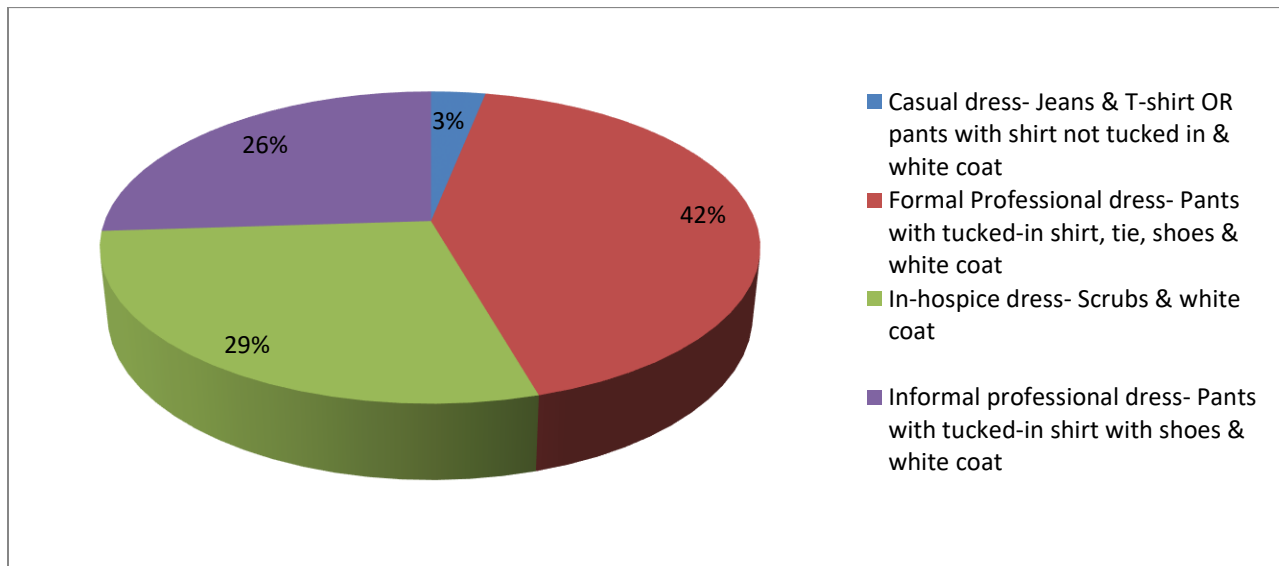


Fig 1: Dress code for male doctors

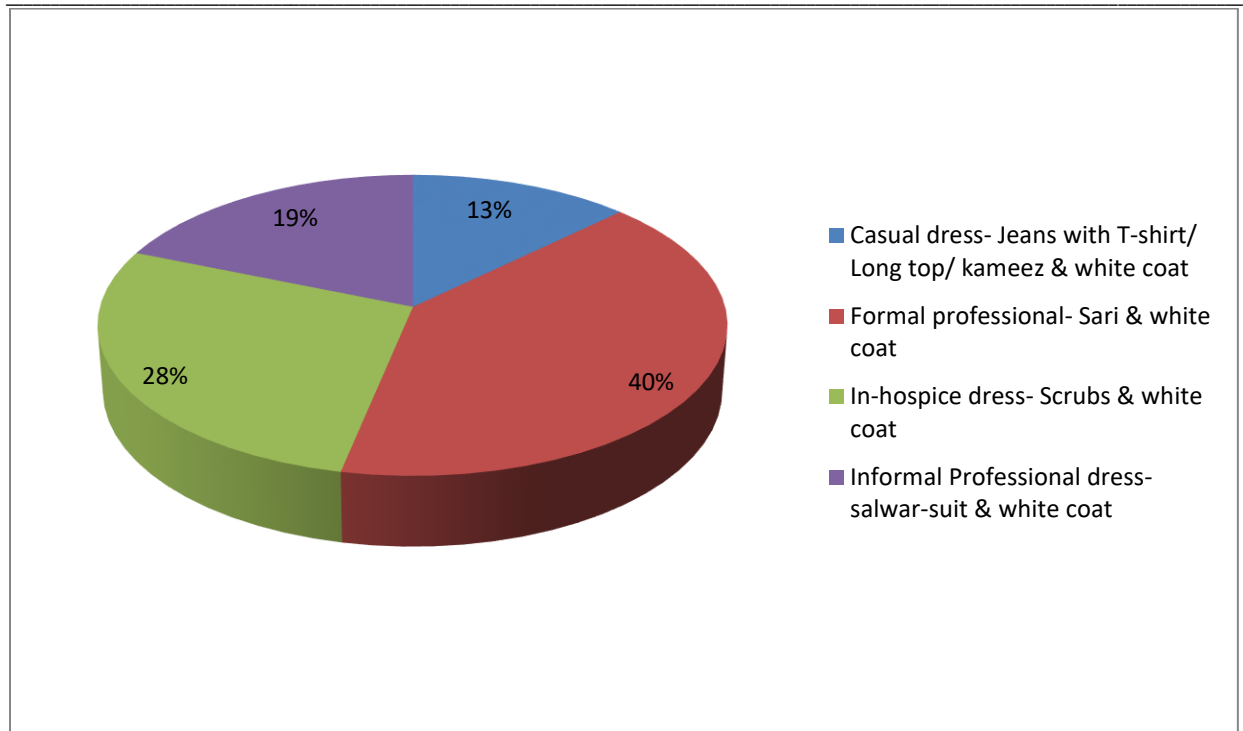


Fig 2: Dress code for female doctors

Discussion

Medical profession is based on effective doctor- patient relationship. From the very first encounter with the patients, the doctors make efforts towards building a rapport with the patient to provide patient-centric care, which is respectful of and responsive to the patients while taking care of their individual preferences, needs and values.

During initial consultation, a patient will develop a first impression of his or her physician based upon the physician's verbal and nonverbal communication, as well as personal attributes like clothing, grooming and cleanliness[7-12]. The importance of physician dress on the patient-physician relationship can be traced back to Hippocrates, who stated that the physician "must be clean in person, well dressed, and anointed with sweet-smelling unguents. Even in ancient societies, the way healers dressed played an important part in rituals of healing. Improving the patient experience and satisfaction is an important target for many hospitals but it is still unclear how to achieve it. One approach is to understand how a physician's attire influences the patient experience and develops guidelines based on patients' preferences. Some healthcare systems across the country and abroad have adopted stringent dress

codes. Yet patient preferences for physician attire are not straightforward. In a systematic review, it was found that, while patients preferred formal attire and white coats, attire such as scrubs or casual dress were

preferred in specific settings[13-18]. In a pioneer study in 1987, Dunn et al reported that 65% of 200 patients wanted their physicians to wear a white coat during a consultation, and the majority believed that physicians should wear formal dress[19]. Many studies reported similar outcomes and the traditional items of attire such as formal dress, a name tag, and a white coat were suggested by respondents as appropriate attire for physicians. A study performed among teenage patients actually measured patient attitudes after encounters with physicians whose dress varied from "very informal" to formal; the results were that dress style made no statistical difference in patient attitudes toward their physician. In other studies, most of the patients claimed that the dress worn by the physician had no influence on their choice of family physician. These findings lead us to accept that patients often have preset notions of how a 'professional' should dress and are more likely to respond positively to those that meet these stereotypes. Strategies targeting

physician dress may therefore enhance trust and satisfaction[20-23]. The white coat still remains a powerful symbol of a physician despite many dramatic changes in the field of medicine. The use of a white coat in medical practice started in the 1880s when surgeons started wearing white coats in their long and arduous search for new aseptic methods. By 20th century, most physicians started using the white coat and it was firmly established as the “doctors’ uniform”. The white color was specifically chosen to associate physicians with purity and cleanliness. It has been established that a doctors’ appearance and dressing style has a significant role in building trust and developing good relationship and communication with the patients. Since the time of Hippocrates, doctors have been given advice on the way they should dress. There are conflicting findings in the literature about the dressing style of physician[21-25]. Several studies have shown that 36% to 80% of their patients preferred that their doctors should wear white coat which accounts for their professionalism, easy identification and hygiene. Some studies reported that patients preferred to see their physician in traditional or formal dress, whereas others report to see their doctor in more casual outfit. British and American studies conducted up to the late 1990s showed that patients were more comfortable with traditional styles of appearance, such as white coats, formal suits, short hair, shirts, and ties. Casual items such as sandals, sports shoes, and jeans generated a negative response. Other factors, such as neatness, smile, or facial expression, were also considered important and had the potential to override the effects of attire. There are limited studies available in India assessing the patients’ preference for doctor’s attire including white coat.[18- 20, 22- 25]

Conclusion

A doctor’s attire is the first thing that catches a patient’s eye. The physical appearance and dress code of the attending doctor does make an impression on the patients and their caregivers. White coats were strongly preferred with informal/ formal attire to build trust and confidence among patients.

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