

Physician Attire - Does it Matter? A Study Evaluating Patient Preferences for Attire for Family Medicine

Eleisha Bell, DO¹; Dorothy Yu, MD¹; Ahmad Abu-Zahra, BS²; Evelyn Keller³; Grace Brannan, PhD⁴; Ioana Stan, MD¹; Heraa Hasnat, MD¹; Cheryl Smith MD^{1,3}; Laci Zawilinski, PhD¹

¹Department of Family Medicine, Ascension Providence Hospital, Southfield, Michigan;

²Michigan State University College of Human Medicine, East Lansing, Michigan;

³Ascension Providence Medical Center-South Lyon, South Lyon, Michigan; ⁴GBD Research and Statistical Consulting LLC, Athens, Ohio

Introduction: Historically, white coats have been the distinctive and respected dress code worn by physicians. With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, many physicians exchanged white coats and professional attire for scrubs and personal protective equipment to feel safer and reduce the spread of infectious pathogens in clinical settings. Our aim was to investigate patient preferences in attire for family physicians in an outpatient setting following the Covid-19 pandemic.

Methods: Patients from two family medicine clinics were recruited to participate in the study from June 2023 to December 2023. Surveys were distributed to volunteers who met demographic criteria: age ≥ 18 years, ability to read and speak English and not legally blind. Patients completed an anonymous survey consisting of six questions that would assess physician attire based on level of knowledge, trustworthiness, caring, approachability, comfortability, and professionalism on a 10-point scale (1=somewhat to 10=extremely). Each photo set included a male and female in one of the following attire: white coat with either business casual attire (#1) or scrubs (#2), or fleece with either business casual attire (#3) or scrubs (#4). A one-way analysis of variance was performed to compare photos sets on variable scores; means $\pm$ standard deviations were calculated. $P < .05$ was considered significant.

Results: A total of 288 patients participated in the study. Photo sets #1 (8.2 ± 2.1) and #3 (7.7 ± 2.4) were significantly different for approachability compared to #2 (7.6 ± 2.5) and #4 (7.6 ± 2.5) ($p = .007$). Otherwise, photo set #1 was significantly different from all other photo sets in regards to knowledge ($p = .0001$), trustworthiness ($p = .0005$), caringness ($p = .0003$), comfortableness ($p = .002$), and professionalism ($p < .0001$).

Conclusions: Patients prefer physicians to wear a white coat with business casual attire, based on all six of our study's domains. Continuation of this study could look at variables of gender and race and the roles they play in patient preference for physician attire.