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Patients Prefer Traditionally Dressed Physicians

Clinical Question: Do patients have perceptions and attitudes regarding the professional appearance of physicians?

Setting: Outpatient (primary care)

Study Design: Cross-sectional

Synopsis: This study was conducted in two family practice offices in Tennessee: a suburban office and a university clinic. A cross-section of 496 patients completed a validated questionnaire asking patients whether physical appearance or certain characteristics were desirable or undesirable on a 5-point Likert scale. The patients also were asked to give their preference of age and sex of a medical care professional. The majority of the respondents were white, with approximately twice as many women as men. Sixty percent of respondents had no preference regarding the sex of their physician, and 56 percent had no preference with regard to the age of their physician.

Patients preferred that physicians wear traditional attire: a name tag, white coat, and visible stethoscope. Dress pants, dress shoes, and a shirt and tie were ranked high for men, and makeup, lipstick, and stockings were ranked high for women. Sandals and clogs, earrings or long hair on male physicians, and blue jeans received the lowest rankings by respondents with regard to desirability. Older patients regarded casual attire more negatively than younger patients did. Private clinic patients considered casual attire much less desirable than did patients who had Medicaid insurance.

Bottom Line: In this group, patients preferred their physicians to be in stereotypical physician attire: white coat, name tag, and stethoscope over a shirt and tie for male physicians, and a dress for female physicians. Older patients and private insurance patients were less accepting of casual wear, such as clogs or sandals, earrings for male physicians, and blue jeans. (Level of Evidence: 4)

ALLEN F. SHAUGHNESSY, PHARM.D.

Study Reference: Keenum AJ, et al. Patients' attitudes regarding physical characteristics of family practice physicians. South Med J December 2003;96:1190-4.

Used with permission from Shaughnessy AF. Patients prefer traditionally dressed physicians. Accessed online June 29, 2004, at: <http://www.InfoPOEMs.com>.

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