



Daniel I.G. Cubero, MD PhD  
danielcubero@uol.com.br

## 77 – *Is Our Appearance Important to Our Patients?*

Daniel I.G. Cubero, MD PhD  
Assistant Professor in Oncology  
and Haematology ABC  
Foundation School of Medicine  
São Paulo, Brazil

It is a fact that few people realize that their appearance, more than an expression of their preferences and style, is communicating to everybody around. Someone else is reading our clothes, our hair, our accessories choice and every body movement all the time. Different from our speech, which we choose to whom we want to communicate, our appearance communicates even to those that we are not dealing with directly.

The recognition of patterns in seconds and the inference of information with few data available is one of the most basic capacities in order to allow human beings to survive in a very complex world. In an ordinary day, we face an uncountable number of information, but we have no time to analyse in details all of them before our decisions. For this reason, unconsciously we use some partial information to make associations with our previous experiences. The more we live the more association we do. For negative experiences we develop prejudices, for positive ones we create empathy.

In some professions, it is very important to create empathy as soon as possible. A pilot of an aircraft needs to transmit emotional stability, reliability and security to passengers even not having the opportunity to interact with all of them. A judge needs to transmit wisdom and impartiality to an audience to whom they are speaking for the very first time. For physicians, which will listen to complaints and confessions from people that they are not familiar, a trustworthy image is important. Because all these professionals will deal to a broad spectrum of people, with all kinds of previous experiences, a neutral and predictable appearance is desirable. Not by chance we can clearly identify strict patterns of dressing for all these professions.

In this context we expect that the doctors appearance matters for the patients and we anticipate that a neutral appearance could fit better (1). In fact, that was what Rossi-Barbosa LA et al found. In a cross-sectional study, with a random sample of patients in public places in a Brazilian city, a total of 182 interviews were held. Interviewees showed a preference for the traditional doctor's profile: white coat, neatly trimmed hair, and no accessories. Moderate use of make-up and accessories (earrings, bracelets, etc.) by women was considered acceptable. Interviewees, especially the elderly, expressed restrictions towards the use of piercing, tattoos, and earrings by male physicians. (2)

Yonekura CL et al, in a University Hospital in Brazil, found a similar result. From 259 patients invited to analyse pictures of 7 different patters of physician attire, the majority presented high degree of discomfort for the use of shorts and Bermuda

shorts, multiple rings, facial piercing, sandals, extravagant hair colour, long hair, blouses exposing the belly, facial piercing, multiple rings, and heavy make-up. (3)

A preference for a neutral doctor appearance is not a Brazilian phenomenon. In a Canadian study performed with 337 family members of consecutive patients admitted to 3 medical-surgical Intensive Care Units (ICUs), the majority of participants reported that wearing an easy to read name tag (77%), neat grooming (65%), and professional dress (59%) were important when first meeting a family member's ICU physician. The absence of visible tattoos (30%) and piercings (39%), or wearing a white coat (32%) were also important. (4) In a study performed in Israel with 168 patients from teaching Family Medicine clinics, 52% preferred the doctors in white coats. Long hair, earrings, and sandals scored low for male physicians, while mini-dress, shorts and tight clothes scored low for female physicians. (5) Despite the physician attire topic is not formally addressed in depth during medical school, in practice the medical student get used with this silent dressing code. Even not reflecting about the reasons, the majority of physician will opt for a neutral appearance during their working time and also in their private lives.

### **Take Home Message**

- Patients use information of physician attire to make associations with their previous experiences.
- Doctor's appearance communicates even to those that they are not dealing directly with.
- The doctors need to be neutral. At the heart, the doctors need to work well, without being noticed.<sup>1</sup>
- Appearance in the physician-patient communication should be included formally in the medical curriculum
- Even not reflecting about the reasons, the majority of physician will opt for a neutral appearance, just because they get used with it.

### **Original Abstract**

<http://www.woncaeurope.org/content/157-our-appearance-important-our-patients>

### **References**

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