Should Doctors Wear White Coat—Patients Perception

Maheshwaran ¹, Gururaj ², Shubha ³, Murthy ⁴, Leena ⁵

Abstract

Introduction: There is now substantive information that adult patients prefer doctors in clinics and hospitals to be traditionally, or at least smartly, dressed; to wear a necktie; to have short hair; and to wear white coats with a name tag. Objective: The objectives of the present study are to determine views of patients attending Sapthagiri medical college hospital on the white coat and to assess patients’ opinion on attire and appearance of doctors. Results: Significantly more of those aged over 50 thought their doctors should wear white coats in comparison with those under 50 (p<0.05). 87.9% believed that white coat would aid in ease of identification and about 70.0% thinks doctor were white coat because of tradition. About 205(51.2%) patients strongly believe that wearing white will not interfere in doctor patient relationship. Conclusion: most of the patients ranked easy of identification and professionalism as the main reasons for doctor wearing white coat.

Key words: doctors, white coat, patient’s perception.

Introduction

Since the time of Hippocrates doctors have been given advice on the way they should dress¹. Sometimes this is for functional or hygienic reasons, but usually it is because of a supposed influence on the doctor-patient relationship. Professional appearance of a doctor is an important element affecting the perception of competence of the doctor among patients and their attendees, thus influencing their compliance².

Despite attempts to increase the opportunities for doctors to be made aware of patients’ views there may still be a discrepancy between patients’ opinion and medical practice³. In a hectic and demanding clinical environment it is often difficult to provide care of a high academic standard and at the same time provide patients with a service that meets all their needs and expectations. Nevertheless, such goals are within the remit of good medical practice, clinical governance, and the Patient’s Charter⁴.

There is now substantive information that adult patients prefer doctors in clinics and hospitals to be traditionally, or at least smartly, dressed; to wear a necktie; to have short hair; and to wear white coats with a name tag (5-10).

When doctors’ and patients’ views differ, it is important to determine the reasons for these differences as these may affect patients’
perceived quality of care and their overall impression of the medical profession\textsuperscript{11}. The objectives of the present study are to determine views of patients attending Sathagiri medical college hospital on the white coat and to assess patients’ opinion on attire and appearance of doctors. This study will help us understand patient’s perception on wearing white coat and to assess whether this affects patients’ perceived quality of care and whether patient education will alter this view.

Methodology

A cross sectional study was conducted among the adult patients attending outpatient departments of medicine, surgery, O& G, pediatrics, orthopedics, ENT, ophthalmology and dermatology. A total of 400 patients were included in this study. All patients above 18 years attending outpatient departments were included in study. Oral consent was obtained from all participating patients. Questionnaire used in this study was standardized by doing a pilot study on 120 subjects. Likert scale method was used to assess the attitude of patients towards white coat. Patients were asked to answer “agree” “disagree” or “no response” to the question. They were given an opportunity to qualify their answers by giving their own reasons. For analysis of the Likert ratings, the patient opinion on doctor’s wearing white coat was given a numerical value. For negative questions value ‘1’ equated to ‘strongly agree’ through to the value ‘5’ which equated to ‘strongly disagree’. For rest of questions value ‘1’ equated to ‘strongly disagree’ through to the value ‘5’ which equated to ‘strongly agree’. The patients’ age, sex, educational qualification, occupation was also noted.

The study was conducted between 9 am to 1 pm for a period of 1 month. Data was analyzed using SPSS version 16 to calculate simple proportion and chi-square test.

Results

Altogether 400 patients were included in the study of which 44% of patients were females. The number of patients aged less than 50 was 340(85%); 60(15%) patients were aged more than 50. Mean age of patients was 45.4. Characteristics of study participants are listed in Table 1. Of the 400 respondents, 175 (56%) patients were male and 225 (44%) female patients. More than 55% patients were from urban area and 33.5% of patients had education up to secondary level, followed by 113(28.2%) patients had education up to graduation. Thirty five percent of participants were housewife and 62(15.5%) participants were in technical jobs. Significantly more of those aged over 50 thought their doctors should wear white coats in comparison with those under 50 (p<0.05) and Patients aged 20–29 were least likely to want their doctor to wear a white coat. There was a significant difference between the patients belonging to various age groups for their views regarding doctors wearing white coat. Table 2 illustrates that of the 308 patients who said doctors should wear white coats, 87.9% believed that white coat would aid in ease of identification and about 70.0% thinks doctor
Table 1. Characteristics of study participants (n=400)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (mean, SD)</td>
<td>45.4 ±16.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex (% male)</td>
<td>53.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residence (% Urban)</td>
<td>55.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation(% Services)</td>
<td>40.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (% High School)</td>
<td>60.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

were white coat because of tradition and this view was most prevalent in the oldest age group (50 years and above).

Nearly 169 (42.2%) patients said doctor wear white coat as it provides pocket for books and equipment and more than half of patients think white coat is worn by doctors to keep their cloths clean.

About 205(51.2%) patients strongly believe that wearing white will not interfere in doctor patient relationship.

The Likert rating data showed a significant difference between male and female participants with regard to doctors wearing white coat. Male Patients ranked easy of identification, tradition, professionalism and to inspire confidence among patients as the main reasons above other for doctor wearing white coat compared to female patients who ranked professionalism, easy of identification and tradition as reasons for doctors wearing white coat.

It was interesting to note that male patients ranked difficulty to keep clean and infection risk as the least likely reason for doctors not wearing white coat as compared to female patients who ranked feeling uncomfortable on wearing and difficulty for obtaining as the least likely reason above other for doctors not wearing white coat.

Table 2. Mean Likert Ratings for patients’ perception on doctor wearing white coat.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception</th>
<th>Male patients</th>
<th>Female patients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doctor wears a white coat because of tradition</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>4.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctor wears a white coat because of peer pressure</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>2.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctors do not wear a white coat because of the infection risk</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>4.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctor wears a white coat because of easy of identification as doctor</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>4.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctors do not wear a white coat as it is hot / uncomfortable</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>4.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctor wears a white coat to keep their clothes clean</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctors do not wear a white coat because of difficulty in obtaining one</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>4.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctor wears a white coat because of the pockets for books/equipment</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctor wears a white coat to keep their clothes clean</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>2.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctors do not wear a white coat because they interfere in the doctor-patient relationship</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>3.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctor wears a white coat because they look professional</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctors do not wear a white coat because it is difficult to keep it clean</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>3.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctors wear a white coat because it inspires confidence and trust among patients</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Note. Items rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) for positive questions and from 5 (strongly disagree) to 1 (strongly agree) for negative questions.

Discussion

The present study showed that 77% of the patients (n=400) favoured doctors wearing white coats. These findings when related to studies done in medical specialties, it was observed that Harnett\textsuperscript{12}, Tiwari et al\textsuperscript{13} and Dunn et al\textsuperscript{5} had found 59% of oncology patients (n=180), 62% of inpatients at Harlow hospital (n=160), and 65% of patients at teaching hospitals in Boston and San Francisco (n=200) respectively, favoured white coats. This differs from the more recent findings of Dover\textsuperscript{14} and Gooden et al\textsuperscript{15} who found that 48% of patients (n=300) and 36% of inpatients (n=154) respectively, favoured white coats. The variation in these results reflects the differing opinions of patients in different countries and time periods.

In this study, it was found that ease of identification was the foremost view of the patients regarding doctors wearing white coat in the oldest age group (75%). This finding is in accordance with a previous study by Harnett\textsuperscript{12}. Although medical opinion in different parts of the world is changing away from the white coat, others feel they still have a positive role. However, it has been suggested that in a hospital where other health care workers wear white coats, a name badge would be a better form of identification.

Less than 5% of patients expressed the view that white coats could be a health hazard, while 12% said they help prevent infections. These differences may be related to difference in awareness levels about the risk factors for transmitting hospital acquired infections. However, several studies have documented bacterial contamination of both white coats and nurses’ uniforms, suggesting a potential risk\textsuperscript{16-19}. Further studies are required to determine if suits, shirts, or ties worn by doctors are similarly colonized and to examine if not wearing white coats reduces hospital acquired infections.

Patients in different age group have considerably different views on doctors wearing white coat. Patients want to be able to identify their doctors and see the white coat as a means of achieving this. It can be suggested that further studies are needed to assess whether this affects patients’ perceived quality of care, and whether patient education about infection risk and the fact that other health care workers also wear white coats will alter their view.

Conclusions

Male Patients ranked easy of identification, tradition, professionalism and to inspire confidence among patients as the main reasons above other for doctor wearing white coat compared to female patients who ranked professionalism, easy of identification as reasons for doctors wearing white coat. More patients especially those older than 50 years, feel that doctors should wear white coats for easy identification.
Acknowledgements
We are greatly thankful to the Principal of Sapthagiri medical college and hospital, Bangalore for granting the permission for carrying out the survey. We express our deep sense of gratitude to all the respondents, hospital administrative and non-administrative staff for their cooperation throughout the study.

References