

## Does the Attire Determine the Professionalism?

Adam Bitterman, DO

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Address correspondence  
to Adam Bitterman, DO,  
North Shore-LIJ  
Plainview Hospital, 888 Old  
Country Rd,  
Plainview, NY 11803-4914.

E-mail:  
adam.bitterman@gmail.com

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I recently sat down with Dr L., a well-known physician in both the orthopedic and Twitter communities. When I walked into his office, the first words out of his mouth were to humorously ridicule my attire. Because I had been concerned about making a good first impression, I broke out the fancy suit—custom tailored, of course—with a matching shoe and belt combination and my go-to “interview tie.” I even made sure the monogrammed cuffs of my shirt were exposed just the right amount. Dr L., on the other hand, let me know that he is “more of a jeans guy.”

I was taken aback when my efforts and formal attire were called into question within a matter of seconds of stepping foot into his office. How do you respond appropriately? Is this something you try and laugh off with your superior? I fumbled for the right words to address Dr L. “Thanks a lot for seeing me today,” I said, “I appreciate you taking the time to meet with me.” I apologized questioningly for my get-up, but again I could not put my finger on exactly what I did wrong. Throughout the meeting I kept thinking about the importance of “professional attire” and what it really means. Here I was, sitting across from a potential mentor donning jeans and a button-down shirt, with a sport jacket draped over the back of his executive chair. It wasn’t until later that I realized Dr L. was just poking fun at the fact that I was dressed to the nines.

He chose to fashion his own professional attire: ditch the suit jacket, matching slacks, and tie for a sport jacket, button down, and jeans. He drove home his hatred of white coats with a story of being scolded for not following the appropriate dress code as a resident physician—a move that nearly ended his career at an early stage.

His patients had yet to question his attire—they never doubted his medical opinion because he had jeans on instead of slacks. In fact, his patients said that they felt more comfortable and were better able to relate and have a conversation with him because his attire did not produce an aura of superiority.

Shortly after my meeting with Dr L., I came across a recent study out of the University of Michigan<sup>1</sup> that examined patients’ perceptions of their physicians based on how the physicians dressed. As a means to enhance the physician-patient relationship and improve patient satisfaction, the researchers set out to better understand the influence of physician attire. Specifically, they investigated confidence level, trust, and satisfaction across a variety of scenarios and medical facilities.

After completing a systematic review of the literature, the authors concluded, “finding a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to optimal physician dress code is improbable.”<sup>1</sup> Instead, they noted that specific “tailored” approaches should be implemented based on “patient, population and contextual factors.”

For the pediatric population, for example, leaving the white coat on the door rack may provide a less intimidating feel for the pediatric population, allowing for a smoother visit for both the patients and their parents.

I commend the work of Petrilli and colleagues<sup>1</sup> and wonder how our medical system will digest their findings and apply their conclusions. The next time you prepare for your work day, whether in the office, hospital, or operating room, be sure to think twice about whether the dressed-up garb is really necessary; ask yourself if there is enough evidence to support the suit.

Both Dr L. and Petrilli and colleagues<sup>1</sup> have led me to realize that what’s most important to me is that I am well received by my patients. In an evidence-based profession, it turns out that we have no real evidence that a fancy suit is the way to go. Because there really is no true dress code for medical professionals, maybe I’ll become more of a jeans guy, too. (doi:10.7556/jaoa.2015.118)

### Reference

1. Petrilli CM, Mack M, Petrilli JJ, Hickner A, Saint S, Chopra V. Understanding the role of physician attire on patient perceptions: a systematic review of the literature—targeting attire to improve likelihood of rapport (TAILOR) investigators. *BMJ Open*. 2015;5(1):e006578. doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2014-006578.