

What dress Says about The doctor

Fashion writers may quibble at doctors' style of dress – but Dr Jon Garvey favours a little eccentricity despite its unsettling effect

Our practice agreement decrees that 'each partner shall keep up an appearance and demean himself generally in a manner becoming to a medical practitioner'.

It is interesting to reflect on what manner of appearances most be-comes a medical practitioner, if only because every so often someone will be heard sounding off about the unkempt appearance of trainees and the falling standards of dress within the profession in general.



On parade! The GP correctly turned out for his rounds?

It is certainly true that fashion writers consider doctors to be among the worst-dressed of professional people, but whether this is a castigation or a compliment depends very much on one's opinion of fashion writers.

The trainee of course is unkempt because, for economic reasons, he is still wearing the suit he donned for his first interview at medical school. But it is still a source of wonder why everybody from fashion editors to solicitors drafting

practice agreements should be so concerned about our dress.

Clothes undoubtedly make a statement about the wearer and, whether consciously or unconsciously, reflect the role he sees for himself.

It is no accident that army uni-forms have evolved from the vainglorious hues of the past to the drab brutality of the nuclear age.

It is generally advocated that doctors should present a 'smart' appearance—well-cut suit, nicely-polished shoes and soon.

To adopt such garb is regarded as a mark of respect for the patient. But this is to ignore the subtlety of non-verbal communication afforded by clothing.

An expensive suit does not smack of respect to the patient, any more than does arriving at his house in a Mercedes Benz—it speaks social superiority.

It says: 'Look at my cut; look at my quality—just do what I say, there's a good fellow, and don't answer back.'

Should we all then wear jeans and bomber jackets to reach our patients' level? No, of course not; unless, that is, this reflects your personality.

I had a registrar, the best I ever worked with in terms of dedication and ability to inspire his patients' confidence, who never wore any-thing but jeans. Grateful patients would recall years later how they had known their baby's delivery, would go well when the registrar turned up in his jeans, tennis racquet under his arm.

This was because *his* clothes made the statement: 'Even when I am off-duty I am concerned for your welfare.' If a lesser man had worn the same clothes, they might well have said: 'I'd rather be playing tennis than looking after you.' The clothing speaks eloquently for the personality.

The only general statement that the wearing of jeans makes is 'I am under 35', so it is surprising to me that they



The other extreme: too informal, perhaps, for even the most radical practice.

remain in medical circles the epitome of slovenly dressing.

The truth is that, like it or not, our clothes will reflect what we are. Conventionality may well give our patients a sense of security, but may also create a barrier for communication—the wearer will be 'a doctor' rather than 'Doctor Paul' or whoever.

Eccentricity may initially unsettle a patient, but will present him a real personality to deal with. You pay your money, and you take your choice.

Of course, if you insist on wearing tin hat and bathing trunks to the surgery,

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your clientele will quite rightly consider that they have no wish to deal with you.

But on the other hand, I would argue that the blanket dictum that doctors should look smart is about as sensible as saying they should all be called Dr Smith.

For myself, as the accompanying photographs show, I try when on duty to keep within the bounds of convention, and abide by my practice agreement. But I am still not sure just for whose sake I am doing it.

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