

## Why do hospital doctors wear white coats?

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### Summary

Seventy-two per cent of all hospital doctors and medical students wear white coats and most wear them > 75% of the time. White coats are worn chiefly for easy recognition by colleagues and patients, to put items in the pockets and to keep clothes clean. Psychiatrists and paediatricians try to maximize rapport with patients by deliberately not wearing white coats.

### Introduction

During this century hospital doctors have taken to wearing white coats. Personal questioning of European GastroClub members from 15 countries from Spain to Russia revealed that white coats were now universal in their hospitals although some doctors also wear white trousers and a few varied the colour and length of sleeve. Older British consultants tell us that the change came in the 1930s and accelerated after the Second World War. When JHB was a student in 1952 he had to wear a suit, but all doctors (except for a few elderly consultants) wore white coats. But why are white coats worn? We have questioned doctors of St Mary's and St Charles's hospitals and clinical students of St Mary's hospital medical school.

### Method

Six hundred and twenty-one questionnaires were sent by internal mail to 424 doctors and 197 clinical students, asking coat wearers how often they wore a white coat (< 25%, 25-50%, 50-75% or > 75% of their time in hospital) and their three most important reasons for wearing one. Doctors who did not wear a white coat were asked to mark their single most important reason for not wearing one.

### Analysis

Coat-wearers were given 3 points for their priority reason, 2 points for their second and 1 point for their third reason. The sum of the number of points for each reason was expressed as the percentage of the total

<i>Reason for wearing a white coat</i>	<i>% of points*</i>
1 easy recognition by colleagues and patients due to continuity of dress	25
2 carrying items in its pockets	23
3 keeping clothes clean	15
4 emphasizing doctor status	7
5 'I have to'/'it is expected'	7
6 preventing own contamination	5
7 a symbol of cleanliness	5
8 preventing patient contamination	3
9 keeping warm	3
10 a psychological barrier	1
11 other reasons	6
	100%

\*n=210 replies

number of points. The reasons for not wearing a white coat and time spent in hospital wearing a coat were expressed as percentages.

### Results and discussion

Of 294 replies (47% reply rate), 233 were from doctors (55% reply rate) with only 61 from medical students (31% reply rate). Forty-two per cent of doctors and medical students wore white coats > 75% of their time in hospital.

Only 29% of doctors and medical students did not wear white coats at all. Most of these (82%) were working in psychiatry or paediatrics and were trying to avoid the negative effect white coats were said to have on rapport with patients in these specialties (51%). Anaesthetists wore theatre clothes rather than white coats and a few consultants wore suits to distinguish themselves from junior doctors in their company.

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