

“The Clothes Doth OFT Proclaim the Man” – What is there in Wearing a ‘White Coat’?

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Abstract: *White coats play a pivotal role in doctor-patient relationship. Some western institutes conduct ceremonies as a rite of passage for students entering medical school. Through these ceremonies, incoming medical students are supposed to become aware of the responsibility associated with being a physician such as upholding scientific excellence and delivering compassionate care for patients. This letter aims at documenting the internal concepts of medical students when they wore the white coat for the first time after entering a medical college. Rediscovering the white coat as a symbol of professionalism might implicitly fosters a sense of entitlement which indirectly helps in professional identity formation of the “to-be” physicians.*

Keywords: White coat, symbolism, bioethics, professionalism

The ‘white coat’ can be symbolised as a ‘rite of passage’ of the physician as he moves from the home to the medical school. It also symbolizes healing, life and the power to preserve these. A study (Joseph N, 1986) points out the critical importance of the patients’ perspective on white coat which is much more than an occupational clothing. For ‘being a physician’, white coat becomes an essential non-linguistic symbol, as this gauges the patients’ reaction towards physicians. In fact, the students after wearing a white coat “accept” themselves as emerging physicians, largely because the patients do.

Keeping this notion in mind, Arnold P. Gold Foundation (Gold A et al., 2006) selected the “white coat” to be a symbol of the profession and initialized the white coat ceremony, to impress upon medical students, the importance of humanism in today’s medicine. Blumhagen, (Blumhagen DW, 1979) after a comprehensive symbol analysis, posited that white coats gave the physicians the image of a “traditional authoritarian figure” in the doctor-patient relationship and also the appearance of scientists seen as validating the science of medicine. Also, the “motifs of whiteness” like purity, goodness and superhuman power (e.g.: Christ and the saints who have exercised their power over human frailties being robed in “white”) made the “white coat” a symbolization of the physician’s image who is always decisive, embodies altruistic virtues and is “immune” to the discriminations existing in the society (Wear D, 1998).

Formation of physician self-concept in a student begins much before entering a medical school. Rejuvenating the symbols in medicine and conveying the historic-anthropological meanings behind them, might help the institutions to prepare their students with a wide range of ethical perspectives. We made an attempt to document the original assumptions of the incoming medical students, upon wearing the “white coat” for the first time after entering the medical college. We conducted this activity on the first day of medical school after the orientation programme. The responses to the open ended question were generated as phrases and tabulated.

Table 4: Feelings on wearing the “white coat” (arranged in order of frequency)

S. No	EXEMPLARY QUOTES
1.	“feeling privileged”
2.	“transforms me into a person filled with confidence”
3.	“lifetime ambition coming true”
4.	“gives me a sense of responsibility”
5.	“an opportunity which is not feasible for many others”
6.	“happiest and important moment in my life”
7.	“it is a sign of service”
8.	“this would make patients feel respectful towards us”
9.	“first step in my life...’white coat’ gives me special recognition anywhere in society ”
10.	“implies that we should have calm and disciplined character”
11.	“after lot of hardships I got to come to this position; feeling proud”
12.	“most important external feature of a doctor; felt like I am also a part of this noble fraternity”
13.	“heavenly feel as I am going to be the first doctor in my family”
14.	“ I feel entitled because the identity of doctor which everyone ‘imagine’ is this white coat”

Medical schools invent ceremonies and rituals to honour and renew the goals of professional development such as compassion and humility. Critics suggest that mere recitation of the oath is of meagre benefit to the students, as it might conflict with personally held beliefs (Veatch RM, 2002). Perhaps, ceremonies should be the first step towards the goal of shaping and supporting the positive professional growth of the “to-be physicians”. Documenting the assumptions by means of reflective exercise would also help the medical educators to achieve the congruence between incoming medical students’ aspirations and their expectations for the key competencies of the patient-centred physicians. Nevertheless, in a pluralistic society like medical school, activities to consider the deep-rooted perception of “professional image,” among incoming students and documenting their perceived values of the “white coat”, are not entirely vapid. Rather than the “identity” foisted on the students, it is the intrinsic valuation of the qualities, which the ceremonies espouses, that matters for the students.

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