



Hospital doctors' attire during COVID-19 and beyond: time for a permanent change

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Abstract

Background The debate on current doctors' attire in Irish hospital resurfaced alongside COVID-19, as a shift in doctors' attire from professional attire to scrubs was observed.

Aim The current study aimed to explore whether COVID-19 has changed the way in which hospital doctors perceive their personal attire, and whether this group wish for changes implemented during COVID-19 to become permanent.

Methods Hospital doctors ($n = 151$), across all specialties and seniority at University Hospital Galway (UHG), filled out a ten-point online questionnaire exploring their experience of and attitudes towards hospital attire during COVID-19. Data collected and analysed in August–September 2020.

Results Seventy-six percent (119) changed their attire during COVID-19 to scrubs (54% to hospital provided; 22% to private). Thirty-eight percent (56) reported feeling uncomfortable with bringing clothing home, highlighting the infection control risk. Seventy-four per cent (110) wanted the change to scrubs as standard attire to become permanent (65% to hospital provided; 9% to private). Thirty-two percent (47) noted a change in patients' perception when wearing scrubs.

Conclusion Hospital doctors changed their attire during COVID-19, and 75% would like these changes to become permanent. Most (67%) did not notice a change in their patient's perception of them, raising questions about the longstanding beliefs surrounding 'professional attire'. A large number of doctors are also worried about bringing clothing home. The humble hospital scrubs have shown their worth amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Why not continue to wear them?

Keywords Attire · Clothing · COVID-19 · Scrubs

Introduction

The debate on current doctors' attire in Irish hospitals resurfaced alongside COVID-19, as a shift in doctors' attire was observed. In particular, a soar in the usage of scrubs, and a general shift away from professional attire, which can be defined as follows: for men, a shirt with or without a tie and jacket, trousers and dress shoes. For women, a blouse, skirt with tights or possibly smart pants and shoes with a small heel, or a smart dress with a blazer or a suit [1].

It is well-established that healthcare workers' attire is contaminated with bacteria [2–4], and that it can act as vectors for transmission of microorganisms that cause infections and illnesses in healthcare workers, patients, and the

community [5]. Thus, during COVID-19, doctors raised concerns around bringing hospital attires home to launder, the availability of clean scrubs, and changing and shower facilities [6].

Doctors are not given sufficient information on how to launder hospital attire adequately at home. Additionally, home laundering is ultimately inferior to commercial processing — along with posing the risk of cross-contamination, with significantly higher bacteria counts being isolated from home-laundered scrubs compared to hospital-laundered scrubs [7]. It is also difficult to ensure that doctors do in fact launder their attire daily [8].

Historically, professional attire has been the standard for most Irish hospital doctors, based on the assumptions that patients prefer such attire [8], while scrubs have only been provided to doctors working in the theatre setting, intensive care or in the emergency department. Other allied healthcare professionals, such as staff nurses, healthcare assistants, physiotherapists and occupational therapists are provided

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separate uniforms. However, these other clinical staff, alongside most doctors in Irish hospitals, are required to launder their hospital attire at home.

With the introduction of COVID-19 to the clinical setting, ordinary clinical tasks suddenly required an increased amount of personal protective equipment (PPE). As PPE became synonymous with patient interaction, healthcare workers have become hyperaware of the role of apparel when protecting oneself and one's surroundings from infections.

Although patients might prefer professional attire, this preference is unlikely to affect patients' level of comfort, satisfaction or trust in the doctors' abilities. Additionally, when informed of the potential risks associated with certain types of attire, patients were willing to change their preferences [9]. Furthermore, traditional professional attire is no longer unanimously expected from patients [10], instead of being replaced with a single feature: daily laundered clothing [8].

Methods

A cross-sectional descriptive survey (available from the authors on request), consisting of ten questions was administered via Survey Monkey™ to current hospital doctors at University Hospital Galway (UHG) in August and September 2020. The participants were invited to take part in an anonymous, self-completion, participants' opinion survey on hospital attire during COVID-19.

Consent was obtained prior to the commencement of the survey by having the participants tick a box stating that they *consented to participate in the study*. Ethical approval was received from the Clinical Research Ethics Committee at University Hospital Galway.

Results

The population surveyed consisted of 151 doctors across all specialities and grades.

Seventy-six percent (115) responded that they changed their attire during COVID-19, 54% to hospital scrubs, and 22% to private scrubs. Only 21% did not change their attire.

Sixty-seven percent reported noticing no difference in patients' perception when wearing scrubs, with the 33% who did, reporting a mix between positive differences e.g. more respect and easier identification and potentially negative e.g. being mistaken for a nurse.

Seventy-four percent (113) reported not receiving any guidelines from their employer on how to dress during

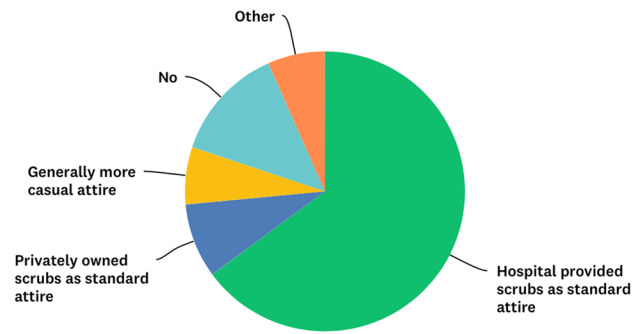


Fig. 1 Survey Question 9 — Would you like any changes experienced during COVID-19 to become permanent?

COVID-19, combined with 78% (118) reporting not having received any guidelines on laundering their hospital attire at home.

When asked whether they wanted any changes made during COVID-19 to be made permanent, 65% (98) wanted hospitals to provide scrubs as standard attire, 9% (13) wanted private scrubs and 7% (10) wanted more casual clothing. Overall, 80% (121) wanted changes made during COVID-19 to become permanent (Fig. 1).

Discussion

Three in four hospital doctors in UHG changed their daily attire to scrubs during COVID-19, with a similar majority wanting such changes to be made permanent. As COVID-19 broke down existing standards surrounding doctors' attire, doctors choose the simple scrubs, a practical, hygienic attire.

Disturbingly, over one-third of doctors felt uncomfortable bringing clothing home after work, highlighting the potential protective mechanism of attire. If provided with hospital laundered scrubs, doctors would not have to concern themselves with the handling and adequate laundering of their hospital attire. The authors recommend that the observed change in hospital doctors' attire during COVID-19 is used as an opportunity to introduce scrubs as the standard attire for hospital doctors, focusing on both patients' and doctors' safety, cleanliness, coherence and comfort.

Declarations

Ethics approval The study received ethics approval from University Hospital Galway. There are no sensitive data, and no patients were recruited for this study.

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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