Dress codes for postgraduate GP recruitment, training and assessment

This Dress Code is offered as guidance to postgraduate doctors undertaking licensing assessments as part of the MRCGP examinations. It has been written in conjunction with Deanery guidance, and applies also to situations of recruitment to GP training, work based training itself and assessment.

Formal professional practice between doctors and patients in the UK is conventionally and appropriately marked by formality of dress. It is therefore legitimate to request trainees to dress in this fashion. This would exclude among others, inappropriately revealing styles, such as low-cut necklines and mini-skirts. In addition, the wearing of dangling jewellery or hairstyles that could interfere with the physical examination of a patient are also regarded as inappropriate. It remains the responsibility of all doctors to ensure that their appearance is compatible with their professional role and does not, in any way, impede the effective delivery of the roles and responsibilities of a doctor; including communication with patients, relatives, carers and other staff.

None of these factors are inconsistent with a general duty to make reasonable efforts to accommodate to needs and preferences arising from religious or cultural factors. An example of this might be a reasonable effort to accommodate to a religious objection to a 'bare below elbows' policy by the provision of special gloves or protectors by a Local Education Provider (LEP). The guidance in this document should be reviewed regularly, be consistent, be clear and applied with sensitivity. Consultation with special interest groups by LEPs, of persons with specific religious or cultural requirements, is recommended if relevant. Guidance is available from NHS Professionals on dress codes and their application throughout the NHS.

Dress codes are mainly the concern of the employer of the GP trainee, rather than the Deanery (whose role may be as a commissioner, provider, or both, of education), or the MRCGP exam. Nonetheless, Deaneries and the RCGP should be mindful of relevant GMC advice that a dress code may require the removal of any garment that inhibits clinical communication - such as those that cover the face. There is some case law on the application of a dress code in a teaching context. A tribunal upheld the right of a local authority to require the removal of a face veil by a teacher as non-discriminatory, given the importance of communication, and the consistent application of such a policy. This decision was sustained at appeal [see below]. These issues are clearly part of a larger agenda concerning respect for principles of equality and diversity fully articulated in GMC Domain 3, to which Deaneries and the RCGP are obliged to conform.

A distinction should be drawn between ‘patient facing’ professional roles, and activity in an educational context alone. For Deaneries, in the latter case, clinical dress codes may not be held to apply in informal settings, but they will apply in formal processes such as recruitment to Vocational Training and ARCP panels, both of which are indirectly educational.

GP Recruitment, selection and assessment will involve contact with simulated patients who should be considered as if they were patients in reality, for clinical communication and assessment of consulting performance. As at 2010-11 this includes assessing communication skills [verbal and non-verbal], and inter-personal skills such as empathy, understanding and sensitivity.

Simulated patients are also a feature of the Clinical Skills Assessment (CSA) element of MRCGP, where communication skills are of similar importance, and demonstration of these skills can be constrained by forms of dress that cover the face.
In addition, in any high stakes assessment, especially one that leads to certification of fitness to practice safely and independently as a GP in the UK, the need to confirm the identities of candidates also may demand that they should be identifiable by comparing their faces to pictorial official documentation, such as a passport photograph.

Suggested RCGP/Deanery Policies:

- Deaneries advise trainees to observe the legitimate dress codes of employing Local Education Providers.
- This may include maintaining appropriate standards of appearance, dress and personal hygiene (for example the avoidance of large earrings, inappropriate skin exposure, unstable shoes etc).
- Differentiation between male and female dress codes is legitimate, given application of the criteria listed above.
- Garments that may interfere with clinical communication, and its assessment, should be removed at appropriate times.
- Similarly MRCGP-CSA examiners should recommend the removal of garments that obscure the face during the exam, and have regard to the maintenance of standards of dress as above. Candidates who chose to wear a face veil during the CSA examination should be aware that in doing so they might impair the ability of the examiner to assess their non-verbal communication skills. They are also likely to impair the ability of those examiners who rely upon lip-reading to assess them completely, and for this reason it is advisable to inform the exam administration well in advance of the examination date if a face veil will be worn.
- Reasonable accommodation to a preference to retain a face covering at recruitment or CSA might include its discreet removal for identification purposes in a private setting. It may also be necessary for identification purposes prior to sitting the AKT.

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References:

NHS Employers guidance

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Overseas Examinations Policy on Unsuitable Clothing (MRCOG)