Royal College of General Practitioners
Dress code 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 and applies also to situations of recruitment to GP training and work based training. It replaces the 2011 guidance and takes into account the 2018 Equality and Human Rights Commission Guidance. That document was written after a full review of the topic and with reference to the relevant legislation. This code also accords with GMC guidance as well as recent publications from the BMA and NHS Employers.

The guidance in this document should be reviewed regularly, be consistent, be clear and applied with sensitivity. Consultation with special interest groups of persons with specific religious or cultural requirements is recommended where relevant.

Formal professional practice between doctors and patients in the UK is conventionally and appropriately marked by formality of dress. It remains the responsibility of all doctors to ensure that their appearance is compatible with their professional position, allowing effective delivery of the roles and responsibilities of a doctor. Such duties include communication with patients, relatives, carers and other staff. This is consistent with a duty to make reasonable efforts to accommodate needs and preferences arising from religious or cultural factors.

Dress codes are mainly the concern of the employer of the GP trainee, rather than the Deanery/LETB (whose role may be as a commissioner, provider, or both, of education), or the MRCGP exam. Nonetheless, educators 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. These issues are clearly part of a larger agenda concerning respect for principles of equality and diversity fully articulated in the Public Service Equality Duty of the 2010 Equality act, to which the RCGP is obliged to conform.

A distinction should be drawn between ‘patient facing’ professional roles, and activity in an educational context alone. For Deaneries/LETBs, clinical dress codes may not be held to apply in informal settings, but they will apply in formal processes such as ARCP panels which are indirectly educational. GP Selection for recruitment and the Clinical Skills Assessment (CSA) element of MRCGP involve contact with simulated patients. These individuals should be considered as if they were real patients for assessment of clinical communication and consulting performance. 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 for independent UK practice, there is a need to confirm the identities of candidates. This may include comparing their faces to pictorial official documentation such as a passport photograph.

Deaneries/LETBs often advise trainees to observe the legitimate dress codes of NHS Employers. These include maintaining appropriate standards of appearance, dress and personal hygiene (for example inappropriate skin exposure, unstable shoes etc). They may also include a ‘bare below the elbow’ policy, to discourage the spread of infections such as MRSA and Clostridium difficile.

There is discussion on wearing full face veils, such as the burqa and the niqab. These should not be confused with the hijab which is a headscarf that does not cover the face. Garments that may interfere with clinical communication, and its assessment, should be removed at appropriate times.

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The MRCGP CSA has regard for the maintenance of standards of dress as above. Given that this examination is a simulation and does not include invasive procedures, no ‘bare below the elbows’ stipulation is required.

Regarding full face veils: the CSA recommends the removal of garments that obscure the face during the exam. 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 may also impair the ability of those examiners who rely upon lip-reading to assess them completely. 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 for 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.

Acknowledgements: This Dress Code was rewritten in 2019 and has been reviewed by the RCGP Associates in Training Committee. We are grateful for their comments and suggestions.

References:

June 2018 Equality and Human Rights Commission Guidance:

BMA Dress Codes at Work
https://www.bma.org.uk/advice/employment/contracts/consultant-contracts/dress-codes


Further sources of information

The Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service guidance on dress codes can be found at:

The Equality and Human Rights Commission provides guidance on avoiding discrimination in dress and business attire, within their Employment Statutory Code of Practice (page 249).