

White Coat Ceremony
University of the Pacific, Arthur A. Dugoni School of Dentistry
Palace of Fine Arts Theatre, San Francisco, California
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Dean Nadershahi, distinguished colleagues, honored guests, ladies and gentlemen.

I have been asked to present a historical perspective on the doctor's white coat and the origin of the White Coat Ceremony.

The white coat has served as the pre-eminent symbol of doctors for over 100 years. A child's earliest memory of a doctor is the person in the white coat. However, you may be surprised to learn that prior to the late 19th century, doctors wore not white, but black.

Black attire was, and is, considered formal. Consequently, until about 1900, doctors wore black since medical encounters were thought of as serious and formal matters. However, until the late 19th century seeking medical advice was usually a last resort and frequently a precursor to death. Until the last third of the 1800s, an encounter with a physician rarely benefited the patient, and virtually all of "medicine" entailed many worthless cures and much quackery.

At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, when medicine became a truly scientific enterprise, the "whiteness" or "pureness" of medicine became reflected in the garb of doctors and nurses. Up until that time, nuns in their black habits functioned as nurses. At the turn of the 19th century, the black habits of the religious nursing orders became white. In fact, to this day, nurses in England are called sisters, because of their religious origins.

Not all doctors wear white coats today – pediatricians and psychiatrists prefer not to. Studies show that younger patients prefer a doctor not to wear white, while older patients prefer the opposite.

How did the white coat come to represent medicine in the first place?

In the 20th century, the white coat became the symbol of medical authority and respect, as advance upon advance firmly established the patient-doctor relationship as a beneficial encounter. Probably the greatest development of medical science in the 20th century was the advent of antibiotics toward the end of World War II. For the first time, pneumonia, appendicitis, an infected blister, or a toothache no longer condemned one to death.

The first full-fledged White Coat Ceremony in medicine took place in 1993 (just 25 years ago) at the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons at the urging of Dr. Arnold P. Gold, who was then Professor of Clinical Neurology and Professor of Clinical Pediatrics at Columbia. At the time, Dr. Gold noted that the existing practice of having students take the Hippocratic oath at the end of their medical training occurred four years too late.

Today, a White Coat Ceremony or similar rite of passage takes place at almost 100 percent of accredited medical and dental schools in the United States and Canada, as well as at Physician Assistant Programs, and most recently, at a growing number of Nursing Schools.

The most important element of the ceremony is the oath that you will take in front of family members, school leadership, and peers. The oath acknowledges your primary role as care givers, and as a reminder that in order to deliver the best care to your patients, humanism, compassion, and empathy must be the hallmark of your clinical practice.

Somewhere around 1996, as luck would have it, I was at the University of Minnesota, a medical school in the Midwest, and noticed a sign, "White Coat Ceremony." I went in and witnessed the moving and emotional placement of the white coat. I immediately returned to the dental school and told our leadership team we were starting a White Coat Ceremony, the first dental school in the nation to do so – what else is new?

Today, we celebrate what it means for you to be a doctor. The compassion, kindness, self-sacrifice, scientific expertise, ethics, and humanity require that these values be modeled by all of us. Your future roles in alleviating human pain and suffering, and creating great smiles must be anchored in these values.

Wear your coat with pride in the accomplishment that it signifies! But also with humility and respect for what you have yet to learn. Treat this white coat with the honor and respect it deserves so that, when you pass the coat to the next generation of dentists, it will be as pristine as it is today.

Doctors: wear it well – wear it proudly – wear it often.

Thank you.

References

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