

History of the Physician's White Coat

Surprisingly, prior to the late 19th century, medical practitioners were not held in high regard by the public. Doctors were not required to have much formal education, and they were not respected as true scientists. They usually wore street clothes, principally black coats, in the office, hospital wards, and operating room. The black garb was intended to represent the formality of the physician-patient encounter, but it also reflected the often fatal outcome associated with the physician's intervention in the course of an illness.

Following publication of the Flexner Report in 1910, many substandard medical schools were closed, and the scientific rigor of the remaining medical education programs was greatly enhanced. At this point, physicians began to wear the white laboratory coats that had previously been worn only by highly respected research scientists. Over time, the white coat has come to symbolize many attributes: purity, cleanliness, seriousness of purpose, scientific excellence and authority, compassion, professionalism, justice, trust, and honor. Along with the stethoscope, it is now the most distinctive representation of the medical profession.

Of note, the first White Coat Ceremony was originated by Dr. Arnold Gold in 1993 at Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons. Such ceremonies now take place at most medical schools in the United States, usually during the first year of the curriculum.

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