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Letters to the Editor

Wearing a white coat in theory class during medical school, is it justified? reply to development and validation of the knowledge, attitude and practice questionnaire (LAUNDERKAP) regarding white coat use among medical students during clinical practice



Recently we have gone through an article regarding the use of white lab coats during the clinical practice class. The author developed the knowledge, attitude, and practice (KAP) questionnaire and distributed it to the medical students of Malaysia.¹ That was a good article and a good study in view of infection control. As we know white lab coat is not only made up of white cloth but is an image of the medical personnel of the population. The medical fraternity can't be imagined without a white coat.²

A medical college is an ideal place of discipline and all medical students who are future clinicians have to follow the rules and regulations of the medical college. When students enter college, they have to purchase a few important materials like books, stethoscopes, and a white lab coat.³ They have to wear a white lab coat all day including theory classes, practical classes, and in the library too. Due to this discipline students wear the white lab coat from their room and attend the school. They remove the lab coat when they reach back into their room. The whole day they wear the lab coat not even sparing the canteen or washroom. Due to this practice, students carry microorganisms and pathogens in their white lab coats.^{4,5,6}

Wearing the lab coat during the practical class is mandatory because it serves as part of students' personal protective equipment. A white lab coat prevents the contamination of students' personal wear and also prevents any hazardous accidents. So, wearing the white coat during the practical class is justified, but wearing it the whole day is not fully understood. Theory classes where the faculties are taking didactic lectures in a large classroom are theory-based classes. Students here are not exposed to any hazardous or infectious material. The same thing is also applicable to the teachers. So then why white coat wearing is a practice acknowledged in these classes.

We don't know when this trend started but this is continuing for a long time. In many meetings and court hearings also the clinicians, who are called for an expert opinion, present with their white lab coats which are completely unjustified.⁷

Wearing a white coat gives you an identity about your profession but everywhere you don't have to wear it. This practice not only makes your white coat dirty but also plays an important role in spreading an infection to you and your friends and family. Many institutes and countries have stopped using a white coat for all grades of medical professionals and changed it to other colors. They have also updated the policy for the use of white coats which still needs to be corrected worldwide.

We conclude the white coat is a symbol of the medical profession. The rational use of white coats in the medical fraternity has only come from personal thinking hence to overcome this habit, one needs to comply by making rules and strict follow-up. Minimum they learn that where to not wear the white lab coats.

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Response to the letter to the editor: “Wearing a white coat in theory class during medical school, is it justified?”



We would like to thank Mukhida et. al. for their letter to the editor and for their message that “The medical fraternity can’t be imagined without a white coat”. While it is true that white coats have traditionally been a universal symbol of medical attire,¹ there is a growing pattern of removal or replacement of the white coat as part of the medical student dress code globally. White coats could act as fomites and potentially transfer pathogenic pathogens to patients and their surroundings such as methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*.^{2–4} Therefore, white coat use in canteens and washrooms should be avoided, as these areas have a high build-up of biofilm and fecal patina.⁵

Besides that, the authors of the letter discussed white coat use in classes, libraries, and labs, and in practical classes, the white coats form part of students’ personal protective gear. The extra layer of clothing provided by white coats may prevent the contamination and contact of hazardous body fluids/chemicals on students’ personal attire. Surveys done on medical students and doctors found this to be a common reason for donning white coats.^{6–8} Furthermore, the authors also pointed to white coats as providing an identity for the medical profession. However, according to some medical students and junior doctors, this has an unexpected consequence of establishing a hierarchy based on seniority, as seen in some medical schools in the United States whereby white coats of differing lengths based on doctor’s ranks were used.⁹ As such, removal or replacements of white coats have been reported by some medical schools in the United States (US) as a means of promoting egalitarianism amongst doctors by removing hierarchal barriers.⁹

The white coat-wearing attitudes and practices of medical students described by the authors are sentiments shared by the LAUNDERKAP team. It is not uncommon to witness students in our faculty wearing white coats outside of hospital settings or having poor knowledge of proper laundering practices to prevent bacterial contamination. Finally, we agree with the authors that the rationalization of white coat use should not be borne only by individual users. Instead, we as a medical fraternity should systematically review the

harms and benefits of white coat use and make an informed decision on it. For example, administrators at one of our local medical institutions have recently enforced the replacement of white coats with surgical scrubs as the attire of choice for medical students in the clinical setting due to microbial transmission concerns. This is in line with the National Health Service’s policy of placing a universal ban on lab coats in the United Kingdom to prevent the spread of deadly hospital-borne infections.^{10,11} Additionally, the authors’ concerns about the risk of infecting others by wearing white coats outside the clinical setting are also echoed by Fernandes, who also suggested a ban on white coats among doctors and medical students in India.¹² Hence, we hope that the validated LAUNDERKAP instrument can further assist this decision-making by characterizing the opinions, attitudes, and practices of medical students regarding this topic.

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