

HEALTH CARE PROVIDER HYGIENE: THE PATIENTS' PERSPECTIVE

by

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ABSTRACT

Background: The impact of health care professionals' hygiene on patients' perspectives of them has not been studied much. The purpose of this survey was to determine if poor health care provider hygiene and appearance affected patients' perspectives of the provider's competence in the clinical setting. *Methods:* An anonymous paper survey was presented to patients eighteen years and older for voluntary completion upon check-in at a clinic associated with a college of optometry. The survey asked if patients had encountered health care providers who had poor hygiene and/or appearance, and what effect it had on their perception of these providers. The survey also asked patients to rank how important proper health care provider hygiene and appearance was to them. *Results:* Bad breath (33.33%) and too much perfume or cologne (26.88%) were the two most encountered issues for patients. Unpleasant body odor had the most overall effect on patient perceptions, specifically on the perception of quality of care (66.67%). Next to body odor was sloppy dress. Bad breath had an effect on both patients' perception of quality care and patients' willingness to refer a friend (both 32.25%). *Conclusions:* Unpleasant body odor had more of an effect on patient perception than sloppy dress. Although many patients felt as though they did not get quality care from the healthcare providers with poor hygiene, very few were affected enough to change providers.

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Introduction

Most of the research done in the past is related to health care provider dress and whether or not certain styles of dress affected patient comfort with the care they received in that clinic or their level of respect for the provider. Specifics have been studied such as whether a tie is important or whether scrubs are perceived as being more professional than a business suit. Trends in patient age and their expectations have also been studied. Some of the results from these studies follow.

A 2003 study done in London at an outpatient clinic found that patients, especially over the age of 70, preferred their doctors to wear white coats primarily for the ease of identification in the clinical setting. However, no research was done to determine if the presence or absence of a white coat had an effect on patient perception of the quality of care received (1).

A 1990 study done in Norway found that the majority of patients preferred their doctors to not wear a white coat. However, this seemed to be linked to whether their current provider wore a white coat or not. If their doctor typically did not wear a coat, the patients favored no white coats to be worn by doctors, and the reverse was also true. Overall, older patients tended to prefer that their doctor wear a white coat when providing care (2).

A 1991 study done at the Gartnavel General Hospital in Glasgow found that the older the patient was, the more stringent they were with their expectations of health care provider dress and appearance. Most patients, however, did not mind if male doctors had an earring or if women wore trousers instead of a skirt (3).

Not many studies have been done on the personal hygiene of health care providers and the effect that it has on their patients' perceptions of them. The purpose of this study was to determine if there was a correlation between health care provider hygiene and patient perceptions of the care that they received. Additionally, the study sought to determine if negative perceptions of these providers altered patient behavior regarding whether they would return for care or refer others to that provider.

Methods

An anonymous descriptive cross-sectional survey was developed and approved by the Human Subject Review Committee at Ferris State University and can be found in Appendix A. The testing population consisted of patients eighteen years of age and older at the Michigan College of Optometry in Big Rapids, Michigan. Completion of the survey was voluntary upon check-in and was presented and collected after completion by the clinical secretary.

The first part of the survey consisted of five primary questions asking patients if they had encountered a healthcare provider with bad breath, who dressed sloppily, had unpleasant body odor, wore too much perfume or cologne, or had tattoos or facial piercings. If the patient answered yes to any of these primary questions, they were asked to answer yes or no to four additional secondary questions for each of the primary questions they answered yes to. Did it affect their perception of his/her ability to provide quality care? Did it affect their ability to trust his/her advice? Did it affect their willingness to refer a friend to him/her? Did it cause them to change doctors?

The second part of the survey asked patients to rank how important the cleanliness and appearance of their healthcare provider was to them. The ranking system was as follows: 1 – Not important, 2 – Somewhat important, 3 – Moderately important, 4 – Very important, and 5 – Extremely important.

Descriptive statistics (numbers and percentages) were performed for all survey items.

Results

A total of 93 surveys were collected. The average age group was 40-49. Survey results for the primary questions are shown in Table 1. It includes the number and percentage of patients who answered “yes” to them. Bad breath (33.33%) and too much perfume or cologne (26.88%) were the two most encountered issues for patients. Unpleasant body odor and tattoos and piercings were the two least encountered issues at 9.68% each.

Survey results for the secondary questions are shown in Table 2. It includes the number and percentage of patients who answered “yes” to them. Unpleasant body odor had the most overall effect on patient perceptions, specifically on the perception of quality of care (66.67%). A close second to body odor was sloppy dress; perception of the quality of care was affected for 52.63% and the willingness to refer a friend to the provider was affected for 42.11% of patients surveyed. Bad breath had an effect on both patients’ perception of quality care and patients’ willingness to refer a friend (both 32.25%). Out of all of the secondary questions, quality of care was the most affected when patients encountered a healthcare professional with any of the five poor hygiene or

appearance categories. Second to quality of care was willingness to refer a friend, next was the ability to trust advice given, and finally the decision to change doctors.

Survey results for the final question, which asked patients to rank the importance of good hygiene and appearance of healthcare providers, are shown in Table 3. A total of 80.64% of patients said it was either very important or extremely important to them that the providers demonstrated good hygiene and appearance. Only 5.31% of patients said it was not important or somewhat important to them.

Table 1: “Yes” responses to primary questions : n (%)

1: Have you encountered a healthcare provider with bad breath?	31 (33.33%)
2: Have you encountered a healthcare provider who dressed sloppily?	19 (20.43%)
3: Have you encountered a healthcare provider who had unpleasant body odor?	9 (9.68%)
4: Have you encountered a healthcare provider who wore too much perfume or cologne?	25 (26.88%)
5: Have you encountered a healthcare provider who had tattoos or facial piercings?	9 (9.68%)

Table 2: “Yes” responses to secondary questions : n (%)

	Primary Question 1	Primary Question 2	Primary Question 3	Primary Question 4	Primary Question 5
Did it affect your perception of his/her ability to provide you with quality care?	10 (32.25%)	10 (52.63%)	6 (66.67%)	2 (8.00%)	1 (11.11%)
Did it affect your ability to trust his/her advice?	3 (9.68%)	6 (31.58%)	2 (22.22%)	1 (4.00%)	1 (11.11%)
Did it affect your willingness to refer a friend to him/her?	10 (32.25%)	8 (42.11%)	3 (33.33%)	4 (16.00%)	1 (11.11%)
Did it cause you to change doctors?	1 (3.23%)	2 (10.53%)	2 (22.22%)	0 (0.00%)	1 (11.11%)

Table 3 : Responses to Question 6 : n (%)

How important is the cleanliness and appearance of your healthcare providers to you?

1 Not Important	2 Somewhat Important	3 Moderately Important	4 Very Important	5 Extremely Important
1 (1.08%)	3 (3.23%)	14 (15.05%)	46 (49.46%)	29 (31.18%)

Discussion

This survey identified that the two most encountered hygiene and appearance issues in healthcare providers were bad breath and too much perfume or cologne. Few of the surveyed patients had encountered a healthcare professional with tattoos, body piercings, or unpleasant body odor. Although many patients encountered providers with too much perfume or cologne, it did not have much of an effect on their perceptions of the provider or the quality of care rendered. However, even though not many patients had encountered unpleasant body odor, the few who did were very affected by it. Also, many patients felt like they did not get quality care from the healthcare providers with poor hygiene, but very few were affected enough to change to another provider for this reason alone.

Since not much research has been done on poor hygiene and what effect it has on patients' perspectives, this survey helped to shed some light on it. However, it does have some limitations. The sample size was small with only 93 surveys completed. The diversity of patients was limited due to the fact that the survey was only distributed in one location. Since the secretary distributed the surveys to patients upon check-in, the reliability of regular distribution was variable due to all the other tasks the secretary was responsible for at the same time.

There is further research that could be done based on the results of this and other studies. The most obvious would be to increase the sample size and its diversity. Age group preferences could also be examined to determine how various age groups perceive these issues. Since this survey asked about healthcare providers in general, more

research could be done about specific types of healthcare providers including, but not limited to, Optometrists, Medical Doctors, and Dentists.

Conclusion

Both current and future healthcare professionals are aware of the effect of style of dress because it has been studied and discussed extensively. However, provider hygiene has not been studied or addressed frequently in the context of healthcare providers. The results of this study indicate that unpleasant body odor actually has a larger effect on patient perception than does sloppy dress. Perception of quality of care is the area which is most affected in a negative manner. Based on these results, it can be inferred that if healthcare professionals are not educated regarding how their hygiene and appearance is affecting their patients' perceptions of them, then patients may not believe they have received the best care possible. More research is needed in order to understand all of the aspects of healthcare provider hygiene and appearance that can affect patient perception of quality of care.

REFERENCES

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2. Anvik, T. Doctors in a white coat—what do patients think and what do doctors do? *Scandinavian Journal of Primary Health Care* July 1990 8(2): 91-4.
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APPENDIX A

SURVEY

Senior Project Survey - Michigan College of Optometry

Please indicate your gender: **M F**

Please indicate your age group: **18-29 30-39 40-49 50-59 60-69 70+**

Please circle **Y**(yes) or **N**(no) for the following questions:

1. Have you encountered a healthcare provider with bad breath? **Y / N**

If Yes, then:

Did it affect your perception of his/her ability to provide you with quality care? **Y / N**

Did it affect your ability to trust his/her advice? **Y / N**

Did it affect your willingness to refer a friend to him/her? **Y / N**

Did it cause you to change doctors? **Y / N**

2. Have you encountered a healthcare provider who dressed sloppily? **Y / N**

If Yes, then:

Did it affect your perception of his/her ability to provide you with quality care? **Y / N**

Did it affect your ability to trust his/her advice? **Y / N**

Did it affect your willingness to refer a friend to him/her? **Y / N**

Did it cause you to change doctors? **Y / N**

3. Have you encountered a healthcare provider who had unpleasant body odor? **Y / N**

If Yes, then:

Did it affect your perception of his/her ability to provide you with quality care? **Y / N**

Did it affect your ability to trust his/her advice? **Y / N**

Did it affect your willingness to refer a friend to him/her? **Y / N**

Did it cause you to change doctors? **Y / N**

4. Have you encountered a healthcare provider who wore too much perfume/cologne?
Y / N

If Yes, then:

Did it affect your perception of his/her ability to provide you with quality care? **Y / N**

Did it affect your ability to trust his/her advice? **Y / N**

Did it affect your willingness to refer a friend to him/her? **Y / N**

Did it cause you to change doctors? **Y / N**

5. Have you encountered a healthcare provider who had tattoos or facial piercings? **Y / N**

If Yes, then:

Did it affect your perception of his/her ability to provide you with quality care? **Y / N**

Did it affect your ability to trust his/her advice? **Y / N**

Did it affect your willingness to refer a friend to him/her? **Y / N**

Did it cause you to change doctors? **Y / N**

6. How important is the cleanliness and appearance of your healthcare providers to you?

Please circle one of the following:

Not
Important
1

Somewhat
Important
2

Moderately
Important
3

Very
Important
4

Extremely
Important
5

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this survey. Your participation is appreciated!