

Appropriate Dress for the Chiropractic Office

Kiki Herfert brings over 30 years worth of worldwide chiropractic experience to her columns, convention presentations, and management work.

"What kind of uniforms, if any, do you think my staff should wear? I've let them wear what they want, but I don't feel they are presenting as polished and professional an appearance as I'd like. I don't know enough about women's clothes/fashion to pick uniforms. Do you have any ideas?" -- a puzzled chiropractor

One of my favorite sayings is, "The secret of life is looking official." "Looking official" is partly how we behave and partly how we look. They work together to produce an effect that we want to give. We recognize people in day-to-day life by their uniforms, whether real or perceived. The business "power suit," police officer, gym outfits, school uniforms, food chain uniforms, and clerk smocks all tell us, consciously or unconsciously who and what someone is. I used to have an official looking jacket and slacks that almost always made flight attendants ask me, "Who do fly with?" This recognition factor can be used to an advantage.

Years ago, most chiropractors had their staff dress to look like nurses. Doctors looked like the doctors in headache commercials: very stiff, very "old movies." Everyone crackled when they walked! As a society and as a profession we were ready for a little loosening up. During the early '70s I wore very casual street clothes in the clinic. I vividly remember calling a new patient and asking him to follow me back to the exam area. He looked at me and asked, "Who are you?" He didn't know that I was a member of the staff! It really changed my thinking. Very shortly after that incident, the whole staff began to wear the first in a series of uniforms.

We wrestled with polyester, pants vs. skirts, a style for all figures and ages, etc. We finally settled on white slacks, colored "tunics" and white shoes. Maybe a little bit "nursey," definitely boring, but the staff agreed it made dressing easy, saved wear and tear on their wardrobe and it was obvious that we were the staff! Some office managers chose to wear street clothes and kept a crisp white blazer that they slipped on when they needed to protect their clothes or "talk seriously" with a patient. As time passed we added logo polo type shirts, logo sweat shirts, etc.

Today, I'd say that if I were choosing uniforms for a staff, I'd choose based on what the staff and office need for balance. If the doctor is young/new in practice or very casual, I'd probably want to balance that with a more serious uniform look. No volleyball team look for them! The same thinking goes if the staff is all very young and needs added authority. If the doctor is older or has a manner that comes across as very severe, I'd try to balance things up with brightly colored polo-style shirts for the staff.

The key to a decision on uniforms is to look at the staff as though you were about to become a patient. Based only on appearance, would you trust these people with your health problem? You may think that sounds silly, but I know from thousands of patient interviews that impressions of the staff, not just the doctor, is a factor in patient compliance/satisfaction. Before they get to know how competent and caring the doctors is, and how effective, efficient and friendly the staff is, they can only judge by impressions.

Although you didn't ask, I have similar feelings about doctors. In the late '60s I remember Reggie Gold (Reggie, I might have the story mixed up but I remember the punch line!) saying that, since the original purpose of the clinic jacket was to protect clothes from blood and fluids, he didn't understand why chiropractors wore clinic jackets "unless they adjusted really hard!" Since chiropractors were "different" some of us wanted to look different from medical doctors. A few doctors have stretched the envelope on this.

When you decide what to wear in the clinic there are a number of considerations. The accepted adage is that you need to be as well dressed as your best dressed patient. If you want to be casual, it better be dressed up casual. To appear more professional (or older and more experienced), a crisp, clean clinic jacket to slip over your adjusting clothes may be just what you need when you talk with a new patient, give a report or have any other serious conversation. If you tend to dress up in the office (or are older, more severe or serious in nature), you might want to choose "happier" ties with your dress shirts or printed blouses and leave the jacket off in the office. You're going to need some unbiased input on this. Maybe from a long time patient or a friend who isn't afraid to hurt your feelings.

There are going to be regional differences on this, but if you and your staff look like you just came off the volleyball court, you might ask, "Would I trust these people with a serious health problem?" If sports chiropractic is your "thing" you might be okay, but would a 60-year-old with chest pains trust you? If you're going to make a mistake, make it on the side of being too serious.

Dear Readers, I appreciate your phone calls and notes and welcome your ideas and suggestions for columns. As always, I'm happy to give you a little free advice, but I won't pay for the phone call!

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