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Erasing the stigma: tattoos in the medical workforce

Tattoos are an expression of personal style and identity that don't negate a doctor's professionalism, argues Bea Duric

Bea Duric *intercalating medical student*

The days of white coat conservatism in the healthcare community are numbered. Or at least they are according to my worldly research supervisor who asks me for the story behind my latest half sleeve tattoo at the end of our meeting. Although I have never experienced any discrimination or criticism for my inked skin on the wards, my supervisor's comments offered a catharsis that I never knew I needed until that moment.

As medical students, we are constantly governed by ideas of "professionalism" that dictate every aspect of our interactions with patients from the management of an illness to our own appearance. Professionalism is a vital element of patient care that ensures safety and quality. Yet when applied as a broad concept it can easily morph into a tool that is used to police doctors' appearances, especially when they fall outside the regressive, narrow conventions of what a doctor "should" look like. This is particularly true as the demographic of the workforce continues to change and we see greater ethnic and gender diversity breaking stereotypes about the medical community.

Many doctors are now abandoning the traditionalist "white coat" cliché as they go about their job in favour of more modern and inventive personal styles. Nonetheless, taboos about body art in the medical workforce persist. A 2018 study found that both medical students and doctors sometimes perceive visible tattoos as deterring from a doctor's professionalism.¹ Numerous respondents in a 2019 survey of nurses reported that despite the positive patient-professional connections they forged with the help of their tattoos, their workplace had a "no visible body art" policy because of concerns about professionalism.² One nurse specifically highlighted the need for healthcare professionals to support each other more and introduce policy changes to protect professionals' right to self-expression. These findings suggest that many tattooed health professionals continue to hide their body art for fear of judgment and employment concerns.

Professionalism need not come at the expense of individuality because the two are not mutually exclusive. Although the former is a measure of the competence or skill expected of a professional, the latter is a deeply personal expression of style and identity that bears no correlation to how good of a clinician you are. In fact, in a workplace environment that is described as increasingly "toxic" and "one-size-fits-all," encouraging people to express their individuality would make doctors feel less like they're interchangeable cogs in a machine, improving

morale and helping to tackle the mental health crisis among healthcare professionals.³

In many different communities and the diasporas from them, tattoos also hold cultural value, with body art re-enacting ancestral traditions and family mandated rituals⁴ and reinforcing belonging and a sense of identity.⁵ If we are serious about promoting greater diversity and cultural awareness in healthcare, then we must acknowledge and protect the diverse physical appearances of our healthcare professionals.

There is no "conventional doctor," or at least we shouldn't push for one. And when it comes to body art, we know that any objections on the basis of concerns about professionalism or patient satisfaction are not evidence based. A 2018 study from the *Emergency Medicine Journal* found that patients did not consider tattooed physicians to be any less competent, caring, professional, or trustworthy than their untattooed counterparts.⁶ This is in line with wider evidence suggesting that physicians are more critical of other physicians' appearance than patients.⁷ The idea, therefore, that tattoos are "unprofessional" in a doctor seems to be self-imposed rather than a byproduct of patients' expectations.

Trying to compartmentalise doctors into cookie cutter models also ignores the value of individuality in building patient-doctor relationships. In a culture where doctors being perceived as "distant" and "unapproachable" by patients is a leading cause of lack of trust (and consequently compromised health outcomes),⁸ we should celebrate these expressions of an authentic self, which help to break down barriers. I know how my own tattoos have often served as talking points for patients of all ages and demographics, from children who admired the bright, neon colours on my arms to the women on the geriatric ward who shared stories about their grandchildren's body ink. Although there are many ways to improve approachability and warmth when communicating with patients, body art has become my personal staple of choice. Thus far, it has never disappointed.

It's been a personal journey for me to fully accept that my appearance does not invalidate my competency as a future healthcare professional. On the contrary, personal style is what makes every doctor unique, a visual shorthand of our humanity and personhood. Whether it is through accepting and destigmatising tattoos, piercings, or neon hair, nurturing individuality makes happier doctors.

Although good progress has been made in dismantling the patriarchal and antiquated image of

what a doctor is supposed to look like, there is still scope for improvement. Until then, I will roll up my sleeves, one day at a time, being the change that I want to see.

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