

GPs and green socks:

don't get stuck between a sock and a hard place

THE CLAUSE

Simply wearing a particular colour of socks could lead to a GP partner losing their job. This is a legitimate and legal approach within some GP partnership agreements, as a way of removing a GP partner. An increasing number of GP partnership contracts contain this legal caveat known as 'the Green Sock Clause'.¹⁻³ It was developed from similar clauses used in legal partnerships whereby a partner can be expelled without reference to their work but is instead described as due to their wearing of green socks.^{2,4-5} This can be helpful when the relationship between partners has irretrievably broken down⁶ and can make dissolving partnerships easier and less protracted.⁶

There has been no research into how aware GPs are of this clause, nor of their sock-wearing habits. However, we have attempted to address this slightly by undertaking a recent observational study last year. An online questionnaire was answered by 321 GPs across the UK regarding their sock or tights colour on their previous working day. This represented 197 partners, 44 salaried, 50 locums, and 30 registrars. Within these respondents, 52% were female and 48% male, mirroring the gender statistics of the GP register where 51.7% are female and 48.3% male.⁶

So how many GPs wear green socks? It was found that 30 GPs (9.35%) wore green socks on their most recent day at work. This included 15 partners, 11 locums, 3 GP trainees, and 1 salaried. Of these, 30% were female and 70% were male. Furthermore, how many GPs are unaware of the green socks clause? The answer is that 57% of the responders were not aware. This included 90% of GP trainees, 77% of locums, 68% of salaried, and 43% of partners.

Therefore, 9.35% of the responders are potentially at risk of expulsion due to their green sock-wearing habit (if they wore the same colour socks while working as a GP partner at a practice that had a green socks clause, that is). This possible gender difference in the colour of socks being worn by males and GPs could be further examined. Perhaps male GPs prefer green

generally or there may be a narrower choice of sock colours for them? Or some male GPs may be aware of such a clause and feel that wearing well-tailored trousers can hide such coloured socks and avert their risk?

As so few partners were aware of the clause, it's unlikely that many partnership agreements will contain it. However, it may not remove the risk of similar such clauses existing. However, further studies could be directed at looking at actual GP partnership agreements and, for those with the green socks clause in it, examining the sock-wearing behaviour and knowledge of said clause among the GPs at those practices.

IS THERE A SEASONAL VARIATION?

Finally, a separate subtopic has come out of this study that GP researchers could look into in the future. Is there seasonal variation in sock-wearing behaviours that may put GP partners at higher risk in certain seasons? Most results were submitted in the winter months when people tend to opt for warmer clothing. As GPs conduct home visits the need to travel outside in the cold increases the likelihood for wearing warm socks. The sock colour green is very popular at Christmas and is a common colour on novelty Christmas socks. Are GPs more likely to lose their jobs from use of the green socks clause at this time or from using socks given at Christmas? A study could also look at other dates such as St Patrick's Day celebrations on 17 March each year where green accessories, perhaps socks as well, are possibly putting extra strains on GP partnerships.

What is clear is that all GP partners and all future prospective partners who currently work or will do so under an agreement that has a green socks clause should be aware of this clause and understand the potential consequences to their employment should they choose to wear green socks. Their choice of hosiery in general or at a specific time of the year could lead to loss of employment, which has implications for them, their families, patients, and the practice as a whole. Steps to help avoid this could be the inclusion of such knowledge in the RCGP curriculum

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for practice management knowledge and be tested in MRCGP assessments. Similar to the assessment of hand washing by candidates in the MRCGP CSA exam, the assessment of candidate sock colour could be done.

The authors have gone through their sock drawers and made some changes — perhaps some of the readers need to as well?

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have never worked for non-green sock manufacturers.

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