

# Why not scrap the word trainee?

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SOME words are intrinsically ugly and the word 'trainee' is one of them. It is also derisive: "Dr Jones is fully booked today, but we could fit you in with the trainee", says the receptionist, and the patients assume they are being palmed off with second best. Is a trainee a proper doctor or a student? Of course, when the patient has seen the trainee, and perhaps been given more time and sympathy than usual, he or she will think differently. Nonetheless, the trainee starts the consultation at a disadvantage which only tact and merit will overcome. What's in a name? "An awful lot", is the answer.

Nowadays the sensible receptionist says, "Would you like to see Dr Brown, who has come to work with us for a year?", or "Would you like to see the new doctor?" If the trainee is female they may say, "Would you like to see the lady doctor?", but this makes a false distinction and, I am told, creates a reservoir of gynaecological problems for the doctor concerned, which is bad luck on her if gynaecology is not her *métier*. Some training practices put a notice in the waiting room, "Dr Brown is joining us for a year starting on 1st April", and this is a sensible method of introduction. Dr Brown is treated as a partner, albeit a temporary one.

So let's scrap the word trainee and, while we are about it, let's abolish the word 'trainer', which conjures up a picture of a moustachioed gentleman in a circus ring flicking his whip at resentful tigers. Few trainees are that resentful or trainers that authoritarian, although, when a group of trainees meet at the bar after a bad day, their conversation may suggest it is not so very far from the truth. Some trainers, too, are a little anxious about being bitten by a tiger, or tigress.

What word can we use instead? There has to be a word because trainees need a group identity as well as their own educational programme and a special method of payment. At this point one must distinguish carefully between what they are called by administrators, organizers and, to a lesser extent, colleagues, and what the patient calls them. The patient, as I have already maintained, should think of them as "Dr Brown". So let's look for another word. The best place to start is

that mine of information *Roget's Thesaurus*, but, unfortunately, the words I was able to dig up were not very helpful. 'Apprentice' and 'probationer' are equally derisive, while 'tenderfoot', 'greenhorn' and 'rabbit' are simply insulting. 'Initiate' and 'catechumen' have a delightfully ecclesiastical flavour. 'Assistant' is nearer the mark, but there are already assistants who are not trainees; besides, the present trainee evolved from the old "trainee assistant" of the 1950s who, as I remember well, did the assisting without the training.

Next we come to 'partner', which is what trainees virtually become when they are established; but in the legal sense they are not partners. The synonyms 'accomplice', 'collaborator' and 'playmate' are, we hope, not relevant. 'Associate' is perhaps the most acceptable word. Dentists have associates to help them but they are roughly equivalent to assistants in general practice and it is an expression I find awkward and with a suggestion of snobbery—"I only associate with the very best people." However, there is strong backing for its use.

After a long search through the thesaurus I came to the conclusion that there is no really suitable word. Maybe we ought to invent one. Until someone comes up with an inspiration, may I suggest that for administrative purposes only we call trainees by the accurate but highly unmemorable title of GPSHO? In their hospital years they are SHOs anyway, while during their general practice year they should be known correctly and politely by their own name. Because the title GPSHO is so technical, no receptionist would use it in conversation with a patient and the staff would accept the new doctor more readily as an acting partner while at the same time doing the necessary teaching. The use of the expression GPSHO would thus become almost entirely limited to administrative matters, and the word 'trainee' would die out.

As for trainers, why not call them "general practice teachers"? It is an honourable title. Hippocrates was a teacher, not a trainer. The term "vocational training scheme" could still stand because it is accurate. This solution is far from perfect, but if anyone could come up with a better one they would be doing a service to medicine in raising the status of trainees and bringing them more speedily to the state of self-reliance, which is the object of the exercise.