

## Out of Hours

# The image of general practice:

the revolution begins

In today's environment of fragmented mass media and popular technologies, GPs are losing the battle on how people perceive them.<sup>1,2</sup> Despite a likely high demand for GPs in the near future, a consistently low number of medical students choose family medicine as first choice for their career. In an academic world that strongly encourages medical specialisation, students perceive that family medicine has lower interest and less intellectual challenge than other medical specialties. This negative image may originate from criticism about GPs in universities and in hospitals.<sup>1,3</sup> Role models are important influences on students' perceptions.<sup>3</sup>

Appearance strongly influences other people's perception of you. The principal purpose of public relations is to promote a positive image, so having a professional image is important for medical practice to remain competitive. Good communication skills are also essential for the competent practice of family medicine. Utilising management strategies can enhance our professional image, build credibility, and help us avoid making tactical errors.

### AN 'OLD-FASHIONED' PROFESSION AND A NEW STRATEGY

The media sometimes still depict an image of an old-fashioned country doctor who works 14 hours a day, dressed in a crumpled shirt, a worn out pullover, and vintage tweed trousers.

Older people from rural districts tend to have a positive image of GPs, who are more negatively viewed by younger people and urban populations.<sup>2</sup> These negative perceptions have tarnished GPs' public and professional image and warned medical students off. Fairly or not, appearance is one of the ways patients and specialists judge clinical skills.<sup>1</sup> From beginning to the end, you are on stage. To gain people's respect and manage how others perceive you, adopt a strategic and proactive approach.

Your personal behaviour also

communicates a message about your professional image.<sup>4</sup> Every word, gesture and expression is being seen and evaluated.

### JUST SMILE

People who are enthusiastic and open-minded smile. Smiling makes you look friendly, approachable, and cheerful. Keep your hands open and arms extended outward: this makes for open body language. Keep your eyes wide and alert. Honest people have a tendency to look others straight in the eye when speaking. A bouncy walk is a sign of a competitive professional. The working world expects a neat, clean, and energetic look that shows you are up to the challenge. Everybody enjoys working with people who are enthusiastic about what they do because they seem to work harder, for longer, and more accurately. Looking well-turned out also engenders self-confidence.

### DRESS TO ATTRACT NOT DISTRACT

I'm not referring to beauty or a strict dress code but professional appearance. Professional clothing means dressing to enhance your authority and promote respect. If you don't look like a leader, you're not likely to be given the role,<sup>5</sup> indeed it is often said that you should dress for the job you *want* not the one you *have*. Image encompasses more than just choosing the right outfit. Colleagues may dismiss your skills and knowledge, and concerns may not be taken seriously when you are dressed in an inappropriate manner. To attract attention to your expertise, don't distract with your physical appearance for all the wrong reasons(!); ensure your clothes are suitable.

Dress according to the requirements of your position and come to work well-groomed and prepared. Forget piercing, tattoos, or other types of body art. Be practical: keep your feet in shape, wear a decent pair of shoes, and always have a spare outfit that you can put on if your clothes get soiled.

### ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE

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### GPs HAVE TALENT

To create vocations, family medicine has to inspire students and encourage them to dream. GPs must stop being passive followers and start to share their insights and ideas. Image is a key factor. Take the opportunity to be proud of yourself and, don't forget, we all have incredible talent.

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