Association between patient perception of surgeons and color of scrub attire

SUMMARY:
- What clinicians wear has been shown to affect patients’ perceived confidence in clinicians’ abilities, and their assessment of clinicians’ intelligence, empathy, and trustworthiness. However, to date, no studies have examined the relationship between scrub color and patients’ perception of providers.
- In this research letter, the authors describe the results of a survey administered to adult patients and visitors at the University of North Carolina Medical Center in Chapel Hill that showed a male and female clinician in differently colored scrubs (light blue, navy blue, green, and black). Participants were asked to identify the male and female whom they most strongly identified with the profession of a surgeon, and then to rank the most and least knowledgeable, skilled, trustworthy, and caring male and female clinicians.
- Data from 113 respondents indicated that both the male and female clinicians wearing green scrubs were most likely to be identified as surgeons. Black scrubs were most commonly associated with each negative characteristic for both male and female models, including being the least knowledgeable, skilled, trustworthy, and caring. The figures in the article show that the magnitude of the difference was 2- to 5-fold, depending on the negative skill being assessed. For example, approximately 60% of respondents indicated that the provider in the black scrubs was the least caring, as compared with 10% to 15% for the other 3 colors.
- The male and female clinicians in blue scrubs were most commonly identified as the most caring by 56.6% and 48.7% of respondents, respectively.
- This study assessed a small convenience sample of patients and does not provide the number of patients approached who did not agree to participate. Moreover, the findings might potentially have differed if patients had been asked about ED providers, given that green is a common scrub color for surgeons but is uncommon among ED providers.

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EDITOR’S COMMENTARY: In this small survey study showing participants pictures of a male and female model wearing 4 different scrub colors, black scrubs were much more frequently associated with negative traits related to knowledge, skill, trust, and level of caring. The results might have differed if the models had been described as ED providers, but this study provides more data indicating that how we look can influence patients’ opinions. It seems to me that if you want to look caring right off the bat, go blue!