

Using the title Doctor for Work or for all Occasions

Qualifying as a doctor is the major milestone in one's professional life. It is also a status uplift. One week one is the nuisance, just about tolerated, medical student hanging around the hospital. The following week one is the sought after and much needed person on the wards. You have a badge with the title doctor before your name, which is pinned on to your scrubs or a lanyard. For the first time one's opinion matters. It is an exciting period in one's career. The job carries a lot of responsibility which with experience and training you will grow into in the years ahead.

Being a doctor has always carried a certain standing in society irrespective of where in the world that you practice. In the public mind the term doctor stands for knowledge, expertise, skill, and integrity. It commands a high level of respect and is socially well received. However, the question has recently been raised whether the title should be reserved for one's medical practice only rather than being extended to all other activities outside work¹.

Should one prefix the title doctor to one's name when applying for a mortgage or car insurance. Some commentators are now suggesting that this could be construed as using the title for social capital in terms of acceptance and trust within one's community. The problem with using the title doctor in activities outside work is that it may raise expectations about you in areas where you have no additional expertise. It is important that doctors don't misuse the trust that society has placed in them.

One doctor stated that he prefers not to use his title outside work for activities such as buying concert tickets or booking holidays. Others have expressed a wish to be accepted for themselves and not be defined by their job. This sentiment appears to have grown in recent years and is more prevalent in the younger generation of doctors.

On the other hand increasing numbers of patients are addressing doctors by their first names rather than the term doctor. In one large study 33% of patients used their doctor's first name². Its more frequent practice in relation to female doctors and those working in primary care.

The MDU has pointed out the need to take care when using the title outside one's professional work and duties. One of the new potential traps is giving wellbeing advice on social media. Your words will carry credibility even on matters where you have no actual expertise. If the advice offered is misleading or incorrect it may cause unwanted adverse publicity and controversy. This can be a particular problem where the doctor is no longer a registered medical practitioner.

On a related issue, doctors are advised not to respond directly to online criticism due to their duty of confidentiality to patients. Where doctors are concerned about comments made online about them, they should seek advice from the medical defence organisation.

Acting as a good Samaritan when one encounters an accident on the street, or while travelling has always been a dilemma for doctors. The activity is defined as a doctor, who is not on duty, offers help in an emergency location compromised by a lack of adequate facilities, equipment and staff. There are strong ethical reasons for doing so.

Most doctors will want to help and will put themselves forward. However your skillset may not be in emergency medicine. In which case you should let this be known so that other more suitable individuals can come forward if available. The advice is to just provide the safest care that you can and ensure that the appropriate emergency services are contacted immediately.

Medicine has greatly changed from the era when the doctor's surgery was in their own home and they were effectively available to their patients 24/7. The term work-life balance and its implications for the medical profession has progressively evolved. The boundaries between professional and private life have been brought sharply into focus³. There are now defined hours when doctors are working or on-call and defined hours when they are not working. The question being raised is whether the title doctor should be reserved for the activities related to work rather than encompassing all the other activities in one's life.

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References:

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