Just call me Michael
Michael Sultan tackles the contentious issue of the title ‘Dr’

There’s been a lot of talk of late regarding the title ‘Dr’, and whether as dentists, we should be allowed to use the title before our names, and even if we should encourage our patients to refer to us as doctors at all.

Some colleagues find themselves incensed by this issue. If patients and staff members don’t refer to them as doctor, they take great offence – they feel that somehow their position is undermined. After all, they’ve done five or more years training in a medical discipline and expect their hard work to be recognised!

You know, I really do have to wonder why some members of our profession find themselves getting so wound up by this. To me this whole debate is completely anachronistic. If a patient comes to me and calls me ‘Dr Sultan’, I don’t feel flattered or delighted that they’ve called me doctor – if anything I feel disappointed. As dentists, aren’t we supposed to be a bit warmer than that?

Attitude
In years gone by as society we’d always insist people call us ‘Dr’ or ‘Mr’ – any sort of title really. But now our attitude to people has shifted. Our attitude to healthcare has also shifted. It’s no longer a ‘you do as I say’ approach, but more a ‘let’s discuss together what we think is best’. Ultimately our aim is to build relationships with patients – to show them that we care. In this context I do think that insisting that we are called doctor acts as a barrier with our patients. As a profession we shouldn’t be so arrogant to think that unless someone calls us doctor they don’t respect us. Instead we should have enough self-confidence as a profession to say well, it doesn’t matter what they call me.

Of course, a lot of this debate goes back to the very early days of what we would now refer to as the medical profession. Back in the day, medical doctors were highly qualified, studied at prestigious universities and were awarded a title at the end of it. This was in contrast to surgeons, who weren’t seen as being anywhere near so prestigious. Back in those days you were part-barber, part-butcher, part-surgeon and rampant elitism meant that as a surgeon (a predominantly male occupation) you were always...
referred to as ‘Mr’.

Perceptions

But perceptions then changed. Doctors were still called doctors, but it then became the norm that if you were a particularly qualified and knowledgeable doctor you might be referred to as a surgeon, or consultant. As a medical doctor then you looked forward to the day where you went from being a ‘Dr’ to being a ‘Mr’ again because you were somehow higher. A strange circle! But while all this was happening, dentists weren’t called doctors at all as they weren’t seen as being as ‘worth’ as doctors. Naturally this claim caused some affront at the time, and the dentists of the day fought hard to receive equal recognition with their medical colleagues.

Nowadays however, none of this makes any difference to anybody. Gone are the days when you could phone up an airline or a restaurant and expect an upgrade on account of your title. Nowadays you pay for what you want. So this debate really is very anachronistic and irrelevant. When I first started working, nurses were told not to call me by my first name. Did it make any difference to their attitudes to me? Absolutely not—they either liked me or they didn’t like me. It’s the same with the patients. I certainly don’t think they respect us any more by calling us doctors or anything else. We should be aiming to break down barriers, not build up even more of a wedge between ourselves and the general public!

Debate

This brings me back to an old saying I was told many years ago now. That is, ‘people don’t need to know you’re clever—they need to know you care’. For me, this saying cuts right to the very heart of the whole doctor debate. Should we be respected? Yes, of course, just as every single individual should be respected. Do we deserve special treatment? Of course not! In my experience, people with an ego hide behind a title. If we want to really form excellent professional relationships with our patients we need to drop this insecurity and start focussing on what we do best—providing the very best levels of patient care that we can. So, when a patient comes to me and says “Can you help me Dr Sultan?” I pause, and I reply: ‘Of course I will do everything in my power to help you, just don’t call me Dr… call me Michael!’

About the author

Dr Michael Sultan BDS MSc DFO FICD is a Specialist in Endodontics and the Clinical Director of EndoCare. Michael qualified at Bristol University in 1986. He worked as a general dental practitioner for 5 years before commencing specialist studies at Guy’s hospital, London. He completed his MSc in Endodontics in 1993 and worked as an in-house Endodontist in various practices before setting up in Harley St, London in 2000. He was admitted onto the specialist register in Endodontics in 1999 and has lectured extensively to postgraduate dental groups as well as lecturing on Endodontic courses at Eastman CFD, University of London. He has been involved with numerous dental groups and has been chairman of the Alpha Omega dental fraternity. In 2008, he became clinical director of EndoCare, a group of specialist practices.