

Case 6: Scrubs

Many nurses and young doctors in training wear their scrubs to and from work. Some do this because it saves time, while others think it looks cool; the practice has been popularized by television programs like "Scrubs" and "Grey's Anatomy." Physicians sometimes wear scrubs for television appearances to lend an air of authenticity to the advice they give to viewers and to studio audiences.

Despite the popularity of the practice, most hospitals prohibit their employees from wearing their scrubs outside of work, except in extraordinary circumstances.

Cleanliness is extremely important in medical environments, and scrubs that have recently been worn outside may put patients at risk. This wouldn't be a problem if medical professionals reliably changed into clean scrubs before work, but evidence suggests that they don't always do this.

Suppose you see a physician or nurse in scrubs eating at a McDonald's outside the hospital. How do you respond? On the one hand, it seems inappropriate to accost them on the spot — you don't know what their circumstances are and therefore don't know for sure whether they are behaving irresponsibly. On the other hand, if they are behaving irresponsibly, shouldn't someone do something? How would you feel if you saw them the next day, coming out of surgery in the same scrubs they wore to McDonald's, to tell you how your friend's surgery went?

Study questions:

1. How should society respond to small misbehaviors that erode the public's trust in institutions like hospitals, police departments, or the government?
2. Your knowledge of the circumstances of the physician or nurse eating at McDonald's is very limited. What bearing does this have on what you ought to do in this situation?
3. Do we ever have a responsibility to get involved in situations where we suspect — but don't know — that wrongdoing is occurring? If so, under what circumstances do we have such a responsibility, and under what circumstances do we not?

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Before coming to Michigan, Dr. Bloom was a staff urologist at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, DC. In 1983, at the time of his discharge from the U.S. Army and upon leaving Walter Reed, he had been promoted to Lt. Colonel and had been appointed chief of pediatric urology. He earned his medical degree from the State University of New York at Buffalo; served dual residencies in surgery and urology at UCLA; and completed a fellowship in pediatric urology at the Institute of Urology of the University of London.