Addressing the problem of undressing

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When it comes to asking reluctant patients to undress for an examination, Dr David Delvin opts for a straightforward, no-nonsense approach.

I’m continuing my campaign to get patients to jolly well speed up when they’re in the surgery. Mind you, we’re not the only profession that wants the public to get a move on. In March this year, it was reported that an Irish priest had pinned this notice to his confessional box:

Make your confession direct and to the point.
And confess only your sins and offences.
No need to explain why you did it.
Thank you very much.

There’s a man after my own heart! Well, today I’d like to draw attention to a factor that makes our patient consultations go on far longer than the standard 10 minutes — their extraordinary British reluctance to take off their clothes.

A multilayered problem
Imagine this scene. I say to a 50-ish gent: “I’d like to examine your tummy and chest, sir. Just slip your things off, please.” He reacts with astonishment, as though it were utterly amazing that a doctor might want to actually examine him. Slowly, he starts to unbutton his overcoat. Five minutes later, he is ponderously taking off his jacket — and looking extremely reluctant to remove his cardigan.

At this point, remember one tip, doctor: don’t ask him any questions. Why not? Because as sure as fate, he will stop undressing while he considers his answer. If you’re unlucky, he may take a good eight or nine minutes before he reaches a stage where you can put a hand on his abdomen, or a stethoscope on his chest.

I guess that part of the reason for all this slowness is our natural British modesty. Even today, we don’t like to remove our togs in front of strangers.

Other nations are often different: a few years ago, a Dutchman came into my consulting room to discuss going on Viagra.

“OK,” I said. “Just take your clothes off and lie down.” Then… whoosh! Before I could manage a quick sip of my coffee, the guy had whipped off absolutely everything, and was lying stark naked on the couch.

In contrast, I recall seeing a young Englishman who’d come in because of a swelling in his scrotum. I practically had to beg him to take off his underpants. His reason? He was terrified that people living in some newly-built houses nearby might see his genitals. The houses in question were a full 50 metres away, behind some trees — and there was a lace curtain at my window.

At least things have improved a bit during my professional career. When I started out in medicine, quite a high proportion of male patients wore three-piece suits. And quite a few of the women had corsets! You can imagine how long they took to remove. Furthermore, there were a fair number of old gentlemen who wore trusses for their hernias. One had to feel sorry for these chaps, but it usually took an eternity to get the apparatus off.

What can be done? I think we ought to put up a notice in the waiting room, a bit like the Irish priest’s one. It might read:

You have about 10 minutes for your appointment so don’t waste time.
If you’re asked to strip, please strip!

Dr David Delvin is a recently retired GP who practised in London, Kent, Norwich, Cambridge and Brighton