

# THE IMAGE OF THE FAMILY DOCTOR IN SOCIETY

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## INTRODUCTION

The actuality of the topic is determined by the essential role played by the family doctor in the healthcare assistance to the population, as he is the "gatekeeper" within the sanitary system and is not only the first, but also the most frequent interface with whom the patient comes into contact in order to improve his health. In this context, building a positive image of the family doctor in relation to the population and society as a whole becomes an important need to be met as it can reflect the level of development of the health system as a entirety, but also the level of satisfaction of the medical staff (in particular the family doctor who needs to be recognized and rewarded for his efforts and role).

The existence of a series of challenges and social changes imposes certain demands on health professionals, especially in terms of their positive image formation, which support the demands of the development of medicine in the European context. All the more so as, at this stage, the population is beginning to choose their doctors on the basis of reputation and fame [1]. As a result, contemporary healthcare beneficiaries are making greater demands on healthcare providers and demanding ever higher standards of care. Therefore, the quality of health care is increasingly measured by patient satisfaction, which reflects a positive image of the health care provided in relation to client goals and expectations [2].

According to the Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language, an image is a sensory reflection of an object in the human mind in the form of sensations, perceptions or representations; spec. visual or auditory representation; (concr.) object perceived by the senses [3].

In the view of the Russian author А.А.Калюжный, the general image of a doctor consists of a personal and professional image, which has quite blurred boundaries, very precise and clear requirements, failure to comply with them leads to misunderstanding and contempt for the specialist. The personal or individual image is the image of the person, seen as an individual, conditioned by his or her

## INTRODUCERE

*Medicul de familie este pilonul de bază al acordării asistenței medicale primare și singura sursă de acoperire continuă a pacienților din comunitate cu asistență medicală calitativă și adecvată. Imaginea publică a unui medic se formează pe baza calităților interioare și a caracteristicilor individuale, precum și a calificărilor profesionale. Formarea imaginii este consecința caracteristicilor de autoexprimare a personalității atractive, care ar trebui să fie îmbunătățite în mod constant și utilizate în mod activ. Imaginea pozitivă a unui medic de familie este crucială în activitatea sa profesională.*

## INTRODUCTION/CONTEXT

*The family doctor is the backbone of primary health care delivery and the only source of continuous coverage of patients in the community with quality and appropriate health care. The public image of a family doctor is shaped by inner qualities and individual characteristics as well as professional qualifications. Image formation is the consequence of self-expressive characteristics of attractive personality, which should be constantly improved and actively used. The positive image of a family doctor is crucial in his/her professional work.*

*PURPOSE: To evaluate the factors contributing to the image of the family doctor - in order to develop recommendations, which would contribute to improve and increase the recognition of the primary care physician in society. In order to achieve this aim, we proposed to achieve some specific objectives: to analyze the literature and international practices regarding the formation and promotion of the image of the family doctor in society; to identify the factors that contribute to the formation of the reputation and authority of family doctors in society, in the view of the representatives of this profession; to evaluate the opinion of the population regarding the image of the family doctor; to elaborate recommendations, which would contribute to the improvement and increase of the recognition of the primary health care doctor in society.*

*MATERIALS AND METHODS. A quantitative and a qualitative study was conducted. The quantitative study consisted in the application of a questionnaire, namely a population-based survey applied on a calculated sample (423 adults from the Republic of Moldova who gave their consent to participate). The qualitative study was carried out by planning and applying 5 focus groups, with the participation of family doctors from different geographical regions of the country - north, south, centre and Chisinau municipality.*

*The results of the research reflected the opinions of the population on the image of family doctors in society, as well as the views of family doctors on the factors that contribute to their reputation and authority in society, and proposals for certain actions that could improve their image.*

*CONCLUSIONS. The specialty of "Family Doctor" is one of the specialties that is not regarded with great interest, and this interest is low even among medical students and continues to remain at the same level of interest among medical specialists, who not infrequently show disrespect and underestimate their role and image in society. The causes of a poor image include a very high workload and insufficient coverage by medical professionals. Despite this trend, the image of family doctors has increased during the Covid-19 pandemic and continues to grow, and the factors contributing to this increase are largely represented by professionalism and communication skills.*

*Keywords: doctor's image, family doctor, personal branding, doctor-patient relationship, patient satisfaction, self-marketing*

internal traits and individual differential features, while the professional image is conditioned by professional characteristics. Both personal and professional images can be positive/negative; internal/external. Several factors contribute to the formation of a doctor's image, such as: appearance (physical constitution, clothing, accessories, hair-style, level of grooming, healthy appearance, smell, make-up, style); kinetics (the gait, gestures, etc.); relationship with the environment; behavior, communication, level of knowledge and education [4, 5].

A good image of the family doctor increases society's confidence in primary health care and consequently improves the accessibility of medical services (in optimal time), both prophylactic and curative, in order to maintain a good state of health of the individual and the population.

According to the data of USMF „Nicolae Testemitanu" in the Republic of Moldova, both the number of residents enrolled in the specialty - family medicine and those graduating from residency in this specialty has decreased significantly in the last 6 years, from 86 in 2016 to 26 in 2021.

Worldwide experience in healthcare indicates that there are some common problems around the world. General practitioners possess a multitude of knowledge, however their skills and competences are not always appreciated. The image of the family doctors suffers greatly, right from the university benches, and continues in their own working environment, as evidenced in their relationship with colleagues. Although primary doctors are the backbone of the medical community, providing the largest proportion of health services to beneficiaries, fewer and fewer graduates are opting for the profession of family doctor, considering it a lower rank in their professional career [6]. Because of disparaging comments, 12% of Australian medical students have changed their decision to become a family doctor [7-10]. From the above context it can be summarized that, at present, there is an insufficiency of national and international research and practices, which led us to initiate a study to assess the image of the family doctor in the perception of adults.

**PURPOSE:** To assess the factors that contribute to the image of the family doctor in order to develop recommendations that would contribute to improving and increasing the recognition of the primary medical care in society.

**OBJECTIVES:** to review the literature and international practices on the formation and promotion of the image of the family doctor in society; to identify the factors that contribute to the formation of the reputation and authority of family doctors in society, in the view of the representatives of this profession; to assess the opinion of the population on the image of the family doctor; to develop recommendations, which would contribute to improving and increasing the recognition of the primary care doctor in society.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS.** Type of study: mixed research - quantitative study complemented by a qualitative study, in which various research methods were applied: historical, epidemiological, sociological, statistical and comparative.

Quantitative: cross-sectional, descriptive, selective study, carried out through 590 questionnaires among the adult population (over 18 years). The questionnaire was developed in the interests of the study and was developed in Google Forms, distributed to adults, online (<https://forms.gle/7feEabynCZmWckJt5>) and on paper,

through Public Authorities in different geographical regions: north, south, centre and mun. Chisinau.

Qualitative: 5 focus groups with 43 family doctors from different geographical regions: north, south, centre and mun. Chisinau. Data collection was realized between December 2021 and February 2022.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION.

### Qualitative study results

In the qualitative study we identified the actual, current perception of the image of the family doctor by the study participants.

Regarding the determinants, in the view of representatives of this profession, the factors contributing to the formation of the reputation and authority of family doctors in society are numerous, but the focus was on deficiencies, barriers and obstacles in relation to professionalism and communication. It was also found that the image of the family doctor suffers from the university benches and is discredited by other medical professionals.

One component of the overall image, that immediately attracts attention and significantly affects professional success, is the external image. In the focus groups, all participants agreed, that "every doctor should have a neat external appearance, as it has an important significance for the image". A good number of doctors mentioned the need for an institution-specific dress code. Non-verbal messages were also mentioned as important in creating the doctor's reputation, as they help a lot in communicating with the beneficiaries.

Regarding the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic on the doctor's image, the family doctors participating in the focus groups had divided opinions: half considered that the doctor's image during this period had increased, while the other half mentioned that it had decreased.

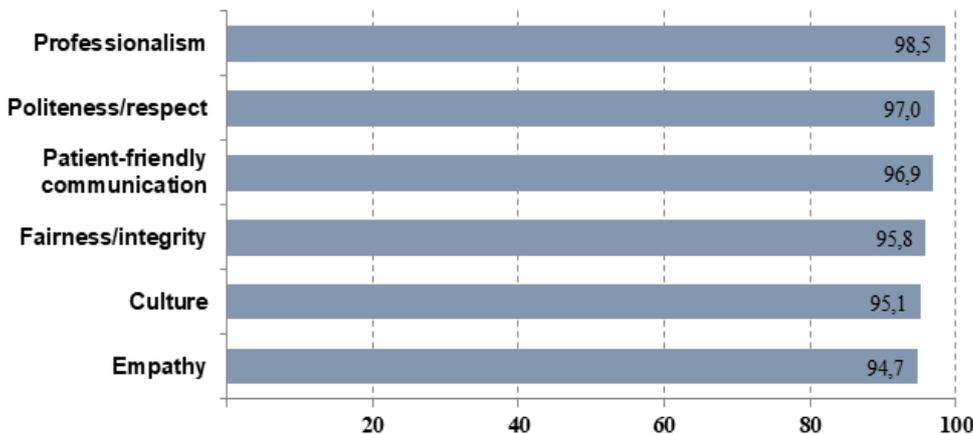
In the study we considered important the self-assessment of doctors, regarding their image and the actions taken for its formation and promotion. A good number of doctors consider that they have a good image in society and to develop and maintain it they attend specializations, trainings and various seminars. In the opinion of the participants, an important role in creating the image of the doctor is played by politicians and the media, but the messages that these actors distribute are often negative, distorted and sometimes unverified. At the same time, some feel that the administration of the institutions in which they work does not do all it can to help them promote a positive image.

### Quantitative study results

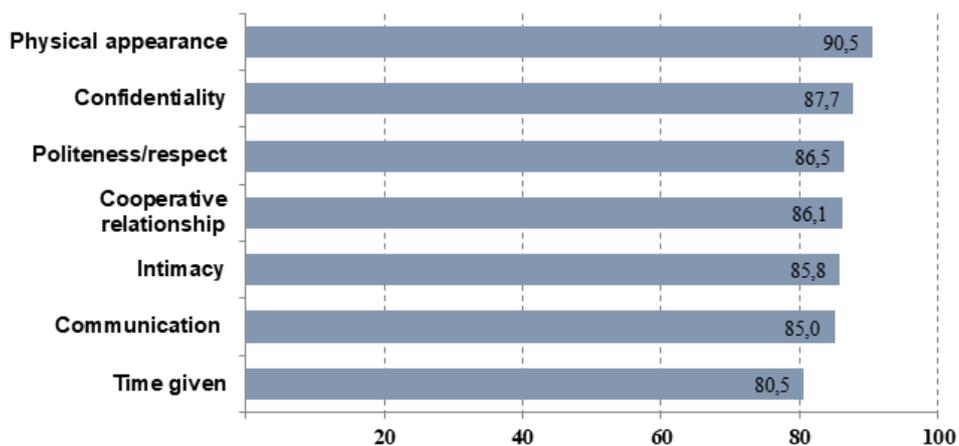
In completing the data collected in the qualitative study, a quantitative study was also carried out, which involved questioning the adult population about the image of the family doctor in society. The questionnaire was completed by 590 people, most of whom were from urban areas - 52.3%, compared to rural areas (282 people) - 47.7%.

Regarding the details of the external image, most respondents (96.8%) consider hand hygiene very →

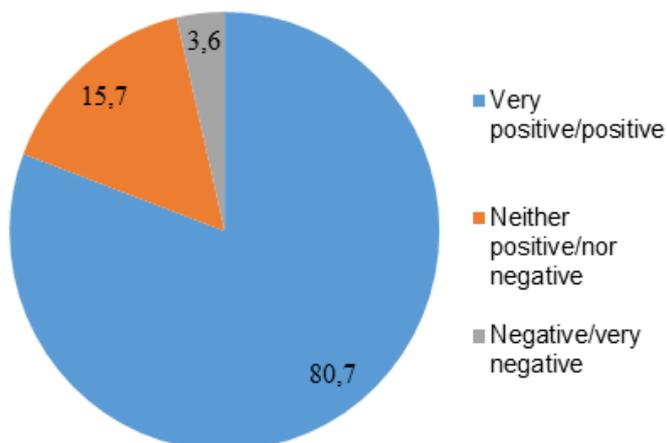
**Figure 1. Importance of factors in the image of the family doctor**



**Figure 2. Satisfaction of the population with the interaction with the family doctor**



**Figure 3. The image of the family doctor in the respondents' vision**



important, 92.7% consider the family doctor's cooperation with other colleagues (hospital specialists, emergency

medical assistance, social assistance, etc.) very important, 80.4% consider clothing and 76.9% non-verbal language (facial expression, gestures, movements, gait), 67.1% consider physical constitution, make-up 38.8%, while accessories only 19.5%. The appearance of the family doctor is rated by the majority of respondents as very neat (93.4%).

In the opinion of the population surveyed, professionalism, friendliness, politeness and respect, patient-friendly communication, fairness/integrity, empathy and culture are the most important factors for the image of the family doctor, being mentioned by 94.7% to 98.5% of respondents. We underline that there are differences depending on the living environment: 15.9% of people from villages noted that they are treated with low/very low empathy, thus only 84.9% of rural participants are treated by the doctor with very high/high empathy, compared to urban 93.5% (see Figure 1).

According to the results it was found that the respondents are less satisfied with the time given by the family doctor (80.5%). Concerning communication, one of the most important factors of the doctor's image, we can appreciate that only 85.0% of health care consumers are

satisfied; the doctor's physical appearance is the element for which the respondents were the most satisfied (90.5%). Other elements, such as cooperative relationship, friendliness, confidentiality, intimacy are rated satisfactorily by 85.8% - 87.7% (see figure 2).

In the view of the respondents family doctors are overloaded with tasks and activities (77.8%). Although health care beneficiaries are not fully able to appreciate the professionalism and knowledge of doctors, their perceptions in this respect (total agreement/agreement) were expressed as follows: 69.7% "most family doctors are professional", 67.4% "competent", 62.2% "kind" and only 58.2% "honest and fair".

The appreciation of the image of the family doctor as very positive/positive was mentioned by 80.7% of the respondents (see figure 3).

More than half of the respondents (53.7%) believe that the image of the family doctor has improved over the last five years. Very satisfied with their family doctor are 78.3% of the respondents, while trust in the family doctor is expressed by only 62.7% of the interviewees. Slightly more than half of the participants (55.78%) noted that they would recommend other people to go to their family doctor for medical services every time.

## CONCLUSIONS

1. The views of doctors and the public on the factors contributing to image formation are similar, focusing on professionalism and communication skills. The Covid-19 pandemic has contributed to the increase of the role and image of the family doctor among the population.
2. External image plays a key role. Although the appearance of the family doctor is appreciated by the beneficiaries as very well-groomed, the most important element in the external image of the doctor is, in the opinion of the population, hand hygiene; a good number of doctors mentioned the need to introduce a dress code, specific to each institution, which would bring more visibility.
3. Although overall the population has a positive impression of family doctors, there are reservations about satisfaction and only just over half would always recommend family doctors to their friends and family.
4. Communication, amiability and respect are areas for improvement.
5. The results of the study show that the image of family doctors suffers from the time they start at university and continue throughout their practice of the medical profession, in their relationship with medical professionals, who show disrespect and underestimate their role. At the same time, the majority of family doctors mentioned that their image in society suffers mainly due to the very high workload and insufficient coverage by medical professionals. This idea is also supported by the health care recipients participating in the survey - 77.8% consider that family doctors are overloaded with tasks and activities. The data obtained represent valid evidence that can support policy makers in making decisions on the establishment of a set of strategic measures that can lead to improving the image of the family doctor in society, with positive consequences on the satisfaction of the population.

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