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Letter to the Editor

A Frenchman in England



Although England and France both have long colonial histories, the multicultural effects on medical practice are managed completely differently.

The UK is more liberal and pragmatic. The state intervenes as little as possible, especially in matters of religion and culture, and laws adapt to behaviour. Conversely, France has a long tradition of secularism, rooted in the French Revolution, and asserted in the 1905 law on the separation of Churches and State. To enforce this, laws come from the centre and are the instrument of political dirigisme.

In England, to avoid stigma, patients have the right to choose the sex of their doctor, even if this involves the sexual discrimination of practitioners. Practitioners may wear a range of distinctive religious or cultural signs, from the veil to the kippah, through the cross, the Sikh turban and the saree. As English doctors no longer wear white coats, English hospitals are much more colourful than French ones and diversity is openly on show. It is amazing, in a country where schoolchildren are still in uniform. Conversely, in France, doctors are considered asexual; the function is in the public domain, the gender is private. The *Collège National des Gynécologues et Obstétriciens Français* has stated that nobody can demand a particular sex for practitioners, even those providing gynaecological cares. Moreover, as state employees, doctors and

nurses are legally forbidden to wear full head cover, except in the theatre where it is mandatory.

Neither solution is free from problems. French uniformity sometimes generates tensions or even violence from patients for whom the sex of the doctor is important. English multiculturalism, can also descend into frank sexism; we heard about a patient requesting a Caesarean after two vaginal births of girls because her third child was a boy.

But things could change in England. Many argue that immigration and feelings of perilous national identity and values led to the Brexit decision. Paradoxically it might also lead to a Franco-English rapprochement, at least in medical practice. The future will tell.

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Received 9 April 2019

Available online 28 April 2019