

The “Doctor” title: Respect or confusion? FREE

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have. If some amateur with an associate's degree finally finds the Higgs boson, nobody will object because he or she is not a "doctor."

When I share my view as a physicist, then yes, the media should use the title to show that I am delivering a professional opinion and am (probably) qualified to do so. When I am talking about the beauty of the Grand Canyon or whether the Republicans have a chance to take the White House in 2012, I would like to be addressed as Mr. Kovalev.

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■ **While I can understand** Robert Cassola's comments and generally share a similar point of view, I offer here an alternative perspective. As scientists, by allowing people to address us informally, without a title, we could exemplify humility and confidence. In reality, the respect we gain is not from our job title or degree but from our contributions to society and the value we add through our discoveries. We may even find ourselves in circumstances where our scientific training will help some of the "doctors" and "officers" we encounter. Let us show our level-headedness, humility, and knowledge by setting an example: We don't demand respect through titles. We only hope to learn fundamental truths about nature and demonstrate them through data that speaks for itself. I hope that someday our society evolves to the point of regarding a degree solely as license to practice the art rather than as license to be highly regarded.

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■ **I am wondering** if the culture Robert Cassola discusses in his letter is actually generated by creative scientists themselves, who may be having too much fun to worry about the social formality of what they should be called. For example, a common cross-sectional unit is called a "barn" by physicists, instead of 100 fm^2 . And Caltech physicists have been known to call their laboratory the lunatic asylum, even in official publications. Scientists were trying hard to create an environment in their laboratories where junior scientists would be encouraged to challenge authority, without the barrier of social hierarchy.

Sixteen years ago I moved to the US from Germany, where a male professor is addressed as Herr Professor Doctor So-and-so. Having in hand my new PhD, I had labeled all my luggage with "Dr. Yin at Harvard University." When I arrived in Boston, the delivery company called and asked, "Dr. Yin, which specialty of medicine do you practice?" I decided at that time that having people call me "Dr." could cause me more trouble than it was worth.

I've always been inspired and influenced by the success stories coming out of the US, regardless of the informality. Steve Jobs and his friends started Apple computers in a garage in California. Bill

Gates dropped out of Harvard to start Microsoft in the New Mexico desert. And where else but in America would a Chinese professor lead a research group that includes a Faroese graduate student and a French postdoc to work on NASA projects?

Who cares what we are called or how formally we are addressed? We are having too much fun and are too awed by the natural wonders we find in our work.

The real problem for me is confusion about when I am supposed to address people formally versus informally. There is a fine distinction, even in the US. I am still learning after 16 years in the country. As the saying goes, I was "raised in a barn" and am perhaps therefore hopeless.

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Analyses of dimensionless science

Diogo Bolster, Robert Hershberger, and Russell Donnelly have written a useful survey of the application of dimensional analysis (PHYSICS TODAY, September 2011, page 42). The

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