

Authority by Title

We are all suckers for titles. What goes through your mind when you hear “Esquire,” “President” or “CEO”? When we hear the word “doctor” in front of a name, it automatically registers in our minds that this person is important, powerful and intelligent. We don’t even ask if s/he graduated at the bottom of her/his medical class. In the medical profession, the “Dr.” is king and head decision maker. We love to hear “two out of three doctors recommend” or “nine out of ten dentists use this product or service.” This advertising tactic is all based on Authority Power. That’s because we respect, admire and follow the recommendations or opinions of those in authority.

In one particular case, researchers wanted to test to see if the power of authority by title won out over established rules and regulations. Their strategy was to see if nurses would over-prescribe an unauthorized drug to a patient when a doctor they didn’t know requested that they do so. A researcher would call in and tell a nurse that he was a doctor and that he wanted a 20mg dose of a drug called Astrogen administered to a certain patient. He would then tell the nurse to follow his order as soon as possible so the drug would have time to take effect by the time he arrived. He further stated that he would sign the prescription upon his arrival. The experiment intentionally violated four critical rules. First, the hospital forbade prescriptions to be made over the phone. Second, Astrogen was an unauthorized drug. Third, the dosage was dangerously excessive. In fact, it was double the amount specified on the label. And fourth, the order was given by a supposed “doctor,” whom the nurse had never met or even heard of. In spite of these red flags, a whopping 95 percent of the nurses headed straight for the medicine cabinet and on to the patient’s room. Before they went any further, they were stopped by an undercover researcher, who informed them of the experiment.