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Opinion: Dr. Jill Biden Earned the Title – and the Right to Determine Her Identity

For professional women whose expertise is so often questioned by men, “Dr.” is an essential distinction

BY CHRISTINE JULIEN, AYELET HAIMSON LUSHKOV, JOHANNA HARTELIUS, AND ALIZA NORWOOD, JANUARY 1, 2021, COLUMNS

Ever since *The Wall Street Journal* published an op-ed calling on Dr. Jill Biden – referred to as “kiddo” in a truly cringeworthy line – to stop using her earned title, the internet has been awash with discussion of whether woman Ph.Ds should be called Drs.

The answer according to Mr. Joseph Epstein is that you shouldn't call yourself “Dr.” until you have delivered a baby. Well, we're all doctors, and although several of us have birthed babies from our own uteri, we're here to tell you that you don't need to deliver a baby to earn the title of Dr.

To imply as much is to take this important topic to a truly ludicrous place – because the real issue here is not about entitlement, but about yet another attempt to police women's identities, and the choices they make about those identities.

For those of us who have completed a graduate degree, a philosophiae doctor, a dissertation, a book or two or more, a stack of peer reviewed journal articles, and so on, what our 19-year-old students call us could not be less relevant to our senses of scholarly accomplishment. The point, rather, is professional.

This semester, like every semester, classicist Dr. Haimson Lushkov told her students to address her as Dr. In response, they asked her – brace yourselves – if that was what her kids called her. Having our students call us Dr. reminds them that we are not their moms, friends, therapists, or guidance counselors. And that's important, because while our students are lovely people, they tend to forget that the accomplished women in front of them are there because of their expertise in a specific area. Our titles reinforce the very reasons we are teaching them.

Moreover – and Epstein's article demonstrates a baffling lack of reflection on this – academic titles are essential for those of us in the professoriate whose expertise is constantly in question, including and especially

women and people of color. The number of times we have all been informally but effectively demoted simply with the use of our first name – sometimes by colleagues who ought to know better – would likely surprise him. Or maybe not; it sounds like he's one of them: "Meet my colleagues, Dr. Man, Professor Dude, and Jill. Sorry, Mrs. Biden."

Truly, there's nothing quite like condescension to reveal the sexism and anger too often directed toward women with high-level degrees. Even among the physician crowd, the work of primary care doctors and pediatricians is often undervalued because it is considered less important than traditionally male-dominated specialties like surgery or radiology. The fact that the issue is Dr. Biden's title – or the typos in her dissertation – rather than the substance and impact of her work only underscores the innumerable instances in which highly educated women find their credentials questioned due to someone else's insecurity or ignorance.

To complete a doctoral degree is to make a fundamental contribution to the advancement of human knowledge. Those of us who completed these degrees spend a lifetime continuously making such contributions and educating the generations of students who follow us. With no disrespect intended to our husbands, the idea that this scholarship is a "small thrill" in comparison to sharing a name (and home, however nice it is) with our husbands is plainly offensive.

Our objections aren't unique to women with Ph.Ds. If you are a woman, your title, whether it's an M.D., J.D., D.Sc., or Ed.D., seems to magically disappear, first when you get married, then when you have kids, then again as you age.

Even though Ph.Ds were referred to as doctors well before the first M.D. was awarded, our point isn't to choose who gets to be called a doctor. It's far simpler: As women, we have the right to choose how we will be referred to, and that includes using any and all of the professional titles we have earned. If that makes anyone feel small, silly, or afraid, well, practice makes perfect. So repeat with us: Dr. Biden.

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