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## Communicating Chemistry, Lab Coat Science

By Jyllian Kemsley

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Oxygen: Actor Patrick Page plays Joseph Priestley eyeing a mouse.  
 Credit: Jeffrey Dunn

If you think you've got what it takes to be chemistry's Carl Sagan or Neil deGrasse Tyson, now's your chance: The producers of an upcoming PBS multimedia project, **"The Mystery of Matter: Search for the Elements,"** are looking for someone to host the show.

The host will narrate a two-hour film that explores how scientists discovered and defined matter. Project director **Stephen Lyons** emphasizes that he wants to communicate not just the science but who the scientists were and how they approached their experiments. **"Many people come out of school with negative feelings about chemistry,"** he says. **"But the more you can make it a story about people and discovery and mystery, the greater the chances of attracting a large audience."** To that end, actors playing **Joseph Priestley, Antoine Lavoisier, Humphry Davy, Dmitri Mendeleev, Marie Curie, Henry Moseley, and Glenn Seaborg** will reenact key experiments using working replicas of the scientists' lab equipment.

But the actors won't get to have all the fun, Lyons tells Newscripsts. The host will also perform demonstrations or use interactive graphics to explain some of the historic science. Lyons and colleagues are looking for someone who is comfortable on camera and "able to convey great enthusiasm for the very human chemical story we're telling," Lyons says.

If you're interested in applying, more information is at [mystery-of-matter.blogspot.com](http://mystery-of-matter.blogspot.com). But don't dally—the production team is already filming the reenactment scenes and plans to tackle the host segments in the fall.

Lyons also produced the **"Forgotten Genius"** episode on "NOVA" about Percy Julian, one of the first African Americans to receive a Ph.D. in chemistry. So Newscripsts eagerly anticipates the 2013 release of "Search for the Elements."

Speaking of history, when exactly did scientists start wearing lab coats? No matter when it was, the stylish garments are now associated with the stereotype that their wearers are attentive, careful, responsible, and focused. New research shows that those attributes are not just in the eye of the beholder. In fact, people who don lab coats perform better on tests for selective and sustained attention.

"The clothes we wear have power not only over others, but also over ourselves," write **Hajo Adam** and **Adam D. Galinsky** of **Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management** in a paper in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (DOI: [10.1016/j.jesp.2012.02.008](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2012.02.008)). Adam and Galinsky studied a phenomenon that they call enclothed cognition, or "the systematic influence of clothes on the wearer's psychological processes and behavioral tendencies."

In their study, the researchers randomly assigned undergraduate students to wear or not wear a disposable white lab coat. They found that the people who wore the coat performed better on a test for selective attention that required naming the color of a word while ignoring the word itself.

Adam and Galinsky then went a step further and identified the coat as either a doctor's coat or an artistic painter's coat, or just had the test subjects see the coat in the room. In these cases, the people who wore the "doctor's" coat did better on a test for sustained attention that involved finding minor differences between two pictures.

The physical act of wearing a piece of clothing therefore seems to actually give the wearer the qualities associated with the clothing—in this case, the ability to attend carefully to the task at hand. **The usual safety considerations aside, this strikes the Newscripsts gang as a good reason to faithfully wear a lab coat when doing experiments.**

Meanwhile, we're off to try on some Lady Gaga headgear. Rah, rah, ah ah ah ...

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Ready to focus: Wearing a lab coat influences behavior.  
 Credit: iStock

Jyllian Kemsley wrote this week's column. Please send comments and suggestions to [newscripsts@acs.org](mailto:newscripsts@acs.org).

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