Editorial

SOCIAL MEDIA, DERMATOLOGY PATIENTS, AND THE TREATING PHYSICIAN

For some time now, I have observed that an increasing number of patients attend dermatology consultations after conducting prior digital research through social media, artificial intelligence platforms, or online medical image searches regarding their dermatologic condition. It is estimated that more than 60–70% of patients do so regularly.

When patients present for consultation, they often possess a certain degree of knowledge about their condition; however, they also carry a considerable amount of misinformation. This situation may alter the physician–patient relationship, as physicians are frequently required to correct misconceptions and, above all, to prevent the development of unrealistic hopes and expectations based on information of questionable reliability.

On the other hand, patients who have previously obtained information on their own generally expect greater collaboration from their physician regarding a condition they believe they already understand. If the physician fails to provide clear explanations, this may lead to conflicts arising from erroneous beliefs, whether related to the underlying disease or to inappropriate treatments that may even place the patient at risk.

At times, physicians may feel as though they are being evaluated by patients who have already performed extensive digital searches on the topic.

Nevertheless, not everything is negative. This patient-driven search for information may foster productive dialogue that strengthens the physician–patient relationship, shifting away from a paternalistic or authoritarian model toward a more informative and educational approach. Such interaction may help prevent situations in which poorly informed patients challenge the physician's diagnosis or request inappropriate treatments.

We also cannot ignore that the widespread availability of dermatologic images on the internet may create uncomfortable dynamics during consultations. Even when the physician provides a simpler and more accurate diagnosis than those encountered online, patients may still respond with the classic question: "Are you sure?"

It is important to remember that online images can often be misleading due to multiple factors, including poor resolution, variations in skin color, or inadequate lighting conditions, all of which may lead patients to incorrect self-diagnoses.

Finally, I would like to recall a well-known premise: "The internet can inform you, but only your physician can diagnose you." This reflects the idea that, although the internet cannot replace true medical education, it may serve as a useful source of information when used responsibly and when consulting reliable digital resources.

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