

Study: Tele-dermatologists Only Scratch the Surface

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Every Internet hypochondriac can agree on one thing: No good can ever come from Google image searching one's own dermatologic irregularities. Spider bite or skin cancer? Only a doctor can know for sure... or can they?

Ideally, every person who wonders about a skin condition can gain access to a dermatologist. But for people on certain Medicaid or insurance plans, telemedicine websites might be the most affordable option—though not always the most accurate, according to a [Wall Street Journal](#) article.

In a study published by the *Journal of the American Medical Association Dermatology*, 16 researchers posed as patients with skin problems to test the diagnostic abilities of online telemedicine services. Armed with a medical back story and stock photos of skin conditions downloaded from the Internet, investigators managed to obtain 62 online visits with arguably mixed results.

When presented with photos of aggressive skin cancer, 11 of 14 physicians advised patients to see a doctor in person while three doctors said the condition was benign. In 31 of the test cases, patients were prescribed medications, but only 10 were told about dangerous side effects, such as potential harm to pregnancies. Additionally, in cases where physicians should've asked for further information but didn't, conditions such as syphilis and herpes were misdiagnosed.

It should come as no surprise to health information management professionals that in only six cases did online doctors offer to send a patient's records to their current physician. But what's more worrisome is that two telehealth companies linked patients to physicians overseas, which led to state licensing discrepancies.

While it's unclear whether in-person visits would've had better results, telemedicine advocates and critics both put the onus on the patient to do their research and to be forthcoming with relevant information about their overall health. For patients and physicians, having a patient's information available when and where it's needed can make all the difference, no matter the healthcare setting.

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