

How to Navigate Challenging Patient Encounters in Dermatology Residency



Le Wen Chiu, MD

RESIDENT PEARLS

- Challenging patient encounters are inevitable in our work as dermatology residents. Both physician- and patient-related factors can contribute.
- Setting boundaries, active listening, and addressing emotions during and after the visit can help to mitigate challenging encounters.

Dermatology residents experience a variety of challenging clinical encounters in their work. There are multiple factors that can contribute to the clinical situation to make it challenging—not only for the resident but also for the patient. Thankfully, there are several strategies published in the medical literature that may be utilized to mediate conflict resolution and de-escalate tension in the dermatology clinic.

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Dermatologists in training are exposed to many different clinical scenarios—from the quick 15-minute encounter to diagnose a case of atopic dermatitis to hours of digging through a medical record to identify a culprit medication in a hospitalized patient with a life-threatening cutaneous drug reaction. Amidst the day-to-day clinical work that we do, there inevitably are interactions we have with patients that are less than ideal. These challenging encounters—whether they be subtle

microaggressions that unfortunately enter the workplace or blatant quarrels between providers and patients that leave both parties dissatisfied—are notable contributors to physician stress levels and can lead to burnout.^{1,2} However, there are positive lessons to be learned from these challenging patient encounters if we manage to withstand them. When we start to understand the factors contributing to difficult clinical encounters, we can begin to develop and apply effective communication tools to productively navigate these experiences.

Defining the Difficult Patient

In 2017, the Global Burden of Disease study revealed that skin disease is the fourth leading cause of nonfatal disease burden worldwide.³ Based on this statistic, it is easy to see how some patients may experience frustration associated with their condition and subsequently displace their discontent on the physician. In one study, nearly 1 of every 6 (16.7%) outpatient encounters was considered difficult by physicians.⁴ Family medicine physicians defined the difficult patient as one who is violent, demanding, aggressive, and rude.⁵ Others in primary care specialties have considered difficult patients to have characteristics that include mental health problems, more than 5 somatic symptoms, and abrasive personalities.^{4,6}

Situational and Physician-Centered Factors in Difficult Patient Encounters

In our medical system, the narrative often is focused on the patient, for better or worse—the patient was difficult,

From the Department of Dermatology, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.

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Correspondence: Le Wen Chiu, MD, University of New Mexico, Department of Dermatology, 1021 Medical Arts NE, Albuquerque, NM 87102

(LChiu@salud.unm.edu).

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thereby making the encounter difficult. However, it is important to remember that difficult encounters can be attributed to several different factors, including those related to the physician, the clinical situation, or both. For example, dermatology residents juggle their clinical duties; academic work including studying, teaching, and/or research; and systemic and personal pressures at all times, whether they are cognizant of it or not. For better or worse, by virtue of being human, residents bring these factors with them to each clinical encounter. The delicate balance of these components can have a considerable impact on our delivery of good health care. This is particularly relevant in dermatology, where residents are subject to limited time during visits, work culture among clinic staff that is out of our control, and prominent complex social issues (for those of us practicing in medically underserved areas). Poor communication skills, underlying bias toward specific health conditions, limited knowledge as a trainee, and our own personal stressors also may play large roles in perceiving a clinical encounter as difficult during dermatology residency.⁷

Strategies to Mitigate Difficult Encounters

As a resident, if you make a statement that sparks a negative response from the patient, acknowledge their negative emotion, try to offer help, or rephrase the original statement to quickly dispel the tension. Validating a patient's emotions and helping them embrace uncertainty can go a long way in the therapeutic relationship, especially in dermatology where so many of our diseases are chronic and without a definite cure.⁸ Additionally, it is important to apply strategies to redirect and de-escalate the situation during emotionally charged conversations, such as active listening, validating and empathizing with emotions, exploring alternative solutions, and providing closure to the conversation. Consensus recommendations for managing challenging encounters established by the American Academy of Family Physicians in 2013 include setting boundaries or modifying schedules, as needed, to handle difficult encounters; employing empathetic listening skills and a nonjudgmental attitude to facilitate trust and adherence to treatment; and assessing for underlying psychological illnesses with referral for appropriate diagnosis and treatment. Finally, the CALMER method—catalyst for change, alter thoughts to change feelings,

listen and then make a diagnosis, make an agreement, education and follow-up, reach out and discuss feelings—is another approach that may be useful.⁷ In dermatology, this approach may not only dissipate unwanted tension but also make progress toward a therapeutic relationship. We cannot control the patient's behavior in a visit, but we need to keep in mind that we are in control of our own reactions to said behavior.⁹ After first acknowledging this, we can then guide patients to take steps toward overcoming the issue. Within the time restrictions of a dermatology clinic visit, residents may use this approach to quickly feel more in control of a distressing situation and remain calm to better care for the patient.

Final Thoughts

Difficult patient encounters are impossible to avoid in any field of medicine, and dermatology is no exception. It will only benefit residents to recognize the multiple factors impacting a challenging encounter now and learn or enhance conflict resolution and communication skills to navigate these dissatisfying and uncomfortable situations, as they are inevitable in our careers.

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