

Community Outreach Benefits Dermatology Residents and Their Patients



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RESIDENT PEARLS

- Outreach initiatives can help residents feel more connected to their community and expand access to care.
- Skin cancer screenings, free clinics, and teledermatology are a few ways residents may get involved in their local communities.

Community outreach is an important aspect of residency training. Skin cancer screenings, free clinics, and teledermatology are a few ways in which dermatology residents may take leadership roles and get involved in their local communities. These opportunities not only provide invaluable education for residents, they also deliver specialty care to communities that may otherwise encounter considerable difficulty accessing dermatologic care.

The sun often is rising in the rearview mirror as I travel with the University of New Mexico dermatology team from Albuquerque to our satellite clinic in Gallup, New Mexico. This twice-monthly trip—with a group usually comprising an attending physician, residents, and medical students—provides an invaluable opportunity for me to take part in delivering care to a majority Native American population and connects our institution and its trainees to the state's rural and indigenous cultures and communities.

Community outreach is an important initiative for many dermatology residency training programs. Engaging with the community outside the clinic setting allows residents to hone their clinical skills, interact with and meet new people, and help to improve access to health care, especially for members of underserved populations.

Limited access to health care remains a pressing issue in the United States, especially for underserved and rural communities. There currently is no standardized way to measure access to care, but multiple contributing factors have been identified, including but not limited to patient wait times and throughput, provider turnover, ratio of dermatologists to patient population, insurance type, and patient outcomes.¹ Fortunately, there are many ways for dermatology residents to get involved and improve access to dermatologic services in their communities, including skin cancer screenings, free clinics, and teledermatology.

Skin Cancer Screenings

More than 40% of community outreach initiatives offered by dermatology residency programs are related to skin cancer screening and prevention.² The American Academy of Dermatology's free skin cancer check program (<https://www.aad.org/member/career/volunteer/spot>) offers a way to participate in or even host a skin cancer screening in your community. Since 1985, this program has identified nearly 300,000 suspicious lesions and more than 30,000 suspected melanomas. Resources for

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setting up a skin cancer screening in your community are available on the program's website. Residents may take this opportunity to teach medical students how to perform full-body skin examinations and/or practice making independent decisions as the supervisor for medical trainees. Skin cancer screening events not only expand access to care in underserved communities but also help residents feel more connected to the local community, especially if they have moved to a new location for their residency training.

Free Clinics

Engaging in educational opportunities offered through residency programs is another way to participate in community outreach. In particular, many programs are affiliated with a School of Medicine within their institution that allows residents to spearhead volunteer opportunities such as working at a free clinic. In fact, more than 30% of initiatives offered at dermatology residency programs are free general dermatology clinics.² Residents are in the unique position of being both learners themselves as well as educators to trainees.³ As part of our role, we can provide crucial specialty care to the community by working in concert with medical students and while also familiarizing ourselves with treating populations that we may not reach in our daily clinical work. For example, by participating in free clinics, we can provide care to vulnerable populations who typically may have financial or time barriers that prevent them from seeking care at the institution-associated clinic, including individuals experiencing homelessness, patients who are uninsured, and individuals who cannot take time off work to pursue medical care. Our presence in the community helps to reduce barriers to specialty care, particularly in the field of dermatology where the access shortage in the context of rising skin cancer rates prompts public health concerns.⁴

Teledermatology

Teledermatology became a way to extend our reach in the community more than ever before during the COVID-19 pandemic. Advances in audio, visual, and data telecommunication have been particularly helpful in dermatology, a specialty that relies heavily on visual cues for diagnosis. Synchronous, asynchronous, and hybrid teledermatology services implemented during the pandemic have gained favor among patients and dermatologists and are still applied in current practice.^{5,6}

For example, in the state of New Mexico (where there is a severe shortage of board-certified dermatologists to care for the state's population), teledermatology has allowed rural providers of all specialties to consult University of New Mexico dermatologists by sending clinical photographs along with patient information and history via secure messaging. Instead of having the patient travel hundreds of miles to see the nearest dermatologist for their skin condition or endure long wait times to get in to see a specialist, primary providers now can initiate treatment or work-up for their patient's skin issue in a timely manner with the use of teledermatology to consult specialists.

Teledermatology has demonstrated cost-effectiveness, accuracy, and efficiency in conveniently expanding access to care. It offers patients and dermatologists flexibility in receiving and delivering health care, respectively.⁷ As residents, learning how to navigate this technologic frontier in health care delivery is imperative, as it will remain a prevalent tool in the future care of our communities, particularly in underserved areas.

Final Thoughts

Through community outreach initiatives, dermatology residents have an opportunity not only to enrich our education but also to connect with and become closer to our patients. Skin cancer screenings, free clinics, and teledermatology have provided ways to reach more communities and remain important aspects of dermatology residency.

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