
Recommendations for improving the patient experience in specialty encounters



Nicholas Golda, MD,^a Stephen Beeson, MD,^b Nita Kohli, MD, MPH,^{a,c} and Brandon Merrill, MD^a
Columbia, Missouri, and Tampa and Orlando, Florida

Learning objectives

After completing this learning activity, participants should be able to appraise the current evidence supporting actions that may improve or worsen the patient experience in the setting of outpatient dermatology and dermatologic surgery, discuss the three areas where the majority of data suggests physicians can improve the patient experience, select and apply evidence-based practices that may improve the patient experience in each physician's individual clinical setting, and recognize that further study is required to provide rigorous evidence for specific interventions that can improve the patient experience.

Disclosures

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The relationship between patient experience and health care quality has generated significant interest in the patient experience measure. However, it is challenging to find information on how to improve one's patient experience score because scientific data on this topic are weak or lacking, and suggestions provided by scoring vendors are often overgeneralized and not specialty-specific. This review will focus on the current state of evidence supporting factors influencing patient experience (both positive and negative) in outpatient specialist encounters that are applicable to general and surgical dermatology. The literature review includes research from multiple medical specialties. Identified studies were based on title and abstract and sourced from Medline, PubMed, and Scopus databases. Medical subject headings terms in PubMed and Ovid Medline included "dermatology/standards," "patient satisfaction," "surgery/standards," "physician-patient relations," "surgery," "practice management," "practice management, medical," "office management," "patient experience," "practice guidelines," "best practice," and "outpatient surgery." During this review, three main themes affecting the patient experience emerged: communication, time, and access. Of the three, communication appears to be the dominant theme affecting the patient experience measure. (J Am Acad Dermatol 2018;78:653-9.)

Key words: dermatologic surgery; dermatology; health care quality; MACRA; MIPS; Mohs surgery; office-based surgery; outpatient surgery; patient experience; patient satisfaction; quality measures; specialty encounters; value-based purchasing.

COMMUNICATION

Key points

- **Setting expectations before, during, and after a clinical encounter positively affects the patient experience**

- **Clear communication on the part of the physician can affect their patient's opinion of them to a greater degree than the technical skill of that physician**

From the Department of Dermatology,^a University of Missouri School of Medicine, Columbia; American Academy of Physician Leadership,^b Tampa; and the Orlando Veterans Administration Medical Center,^c Orlando.

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Correspondence to: Nicholas Golda, MD, University of Missouri School of Medicine, One Hospital Dr, Rm MA111, Dermatology, Columbia, MO 65212. E-mail: goldan@health.missouri.edu.
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Table I. Factors affecting the patient experience

Positive impact	Negative impact	No impact
Clear communication by physician and physician's staff	Poor physician communication, explanations without detail	Patient assessment of technical skill of provider
Answering patient questions and addressing concerns directly	Leaving important questions unanswered	Shared decision-making aid instruments
Empathy expressed by provider and feeling that provider listened	Lack of empathy, feeling as though a provider does not care	Increased time spent with patient after controlling for physician interpersonal skills controlled
Taking time to explain disease processes and treatments	Feeling rushed through the visit	Increased time spent with patient after controlling for physician interpersonal skills controlled;
Physically touching patients and closely examining them (magnification, overhead lights, dermoscope)	Prolonged wait before an initial appointment	video-based consents and wound care instructions
Making patients aware of coordination of care and communication between referring and specialist practices	Lack of appropriate follow-up as determined by the patient	Making patient see a postoperative defect before repair
Giving patients handouts that they are able to read and understand		
Sitting instead of standing during the visit		
Close follow-up and clear postvisit instructions		
Quick access to care, preappointment communication if long wait anticipated		
Managing patient expectations before, during, and after the visit		

The patient experience at a doctor's consultation is most affected, either positively or negatively, by the physician's quality of communication and character. Physician communication skills are strongly correlated with patient adherence to therapy and, therefore, can be associated with higher-quality care. In addition, it has been shown that training physicians in communication skills yields significant improvements in patient adherence to treatments (level of evidence 1A, practice grade A).¹

In a qualitative assessment of online surveys of dermatology patients consisting of 1000 free text comments over 4 years, patients considered kindness, patience, and physician knowledge to be the most important attributes of their physician. In addition, these patients noted listening, addressing specific concerns, answering questions, and explaining treatments as important characteristics. Poorer patient experiences were associated with physicians who were impatient, rude, or who left questions unaddressed (level of evidence 3B, practice grade B).² A systematic qualitative assessment of online surveys found that the most important factor relating to a positive patient experience was when the patient felt that their physician cared about them and listened to them. These behaviors have been associated with the development of trust (level of evidence 3B, practice grade B).³ Likewise, a study of 345

outpatient plastic surgery patients showed statistically significant associations between positive patient experience and the personal manner of the physician and clear communication. Interestingly, the patient-perceived technical skill of the physician, as assessed by the Visit-Specific Patient Satisfaction Questionnaire, did not have a statistically significant influence on patient experience (level of evidence 3B, practice grade B).⁴ A longitudinal observational study of 722 patients surveyed by questionnaire found that the most impactful factor involved in a positive patient experience was the physician's interpersonal skills; specifically, that physicians listened to their patients, explained things well, and showed concern for their patients (level of evidence 3B, practice grade B).⁵ In a prospective study of >800 dermatologic surgery encounters, patients were more satisfied by good communication with their physician, the interpersonal skills of staff, and financial aspects of their care than they were with the time spent with the physician, physician access, and patient assessments of technical quality (assessed by the Visit-Specific Patient Satisfaction Questionnaire; level of evidence 2B, practice grade B).⁶ In sum, these studies reinforce the powerful role of communication and interpersonal skills for dermatologists and dermatologic surgeons to maintain positive patient experiences (Table I).

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