

## Synopsis: How do we achieve healthy skin for all?

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There is a substantial and growing body of research quantifying the health and economic burden of dermatological disease. Alarming, there were nearly 4,000 deaths from skin disease in the UK in 2005<sup>1</sup>, and total direct expenditure in the NHS in England and Wales in 2005/06 for skin diseases was £1,424 million, representing 2.23% of total NHS expenditure<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, it has been shown that psoriasis can have as much negative physical, social and psychological impact as major conditions such as angina or cancer<sup>3</sup>. There is a clear need and an undeniable case for the greater inclusion of skin disease prevention and management in national and global health policies.

Effective primary prevention of disease is crucial in attaining healthy skin for all, highlighted by the well established correlation between early disease detection and improved survival in melanoma<sup>4</sup>. Established educational focal points to consider and build upon include sunscreen application<sup>5,6,7</sup>, the 'ABCD' acronym for warning signs of melanoma<sup>8</sup>, and the SunWise School Program<sup>9</sup>.

Vaccination is another preventative measure that cannot be ignored. Whilst we are armed with a handful of effective vaccinations, i.e. for varicella and HPV, suitable vaccines against some of the more common conditions such as acne vulgaris are not yet available. The implementation of routine immunisations for skin conditions would not only reduce the overall incidence of disease but would also lower the direct and indirect costs associated with health care<sup>10</sup>, and continued research is therefore essential.

Another step towards achieving healthy skin for all is empowering the patient in the treatment of their dermatological illness<sup>11</sup>. Effective treatment for skin conditions such as atopic dermatitis with creams and ointments is partly dependent on the patient's mastery of applying the treatment, i.e. utilising the right preparation at the right time in the right place. This may be achieved through therapeutic patient education<sup>12</sup> and skin self-examination by patients<sup>13</sup>.

Improving patient adherence to medication is also key. Enhancing the doctor-patient relationship by improving communication, i.e. by taking more time to explain the condition and rationale for treatment, and even demonstrating how to apply the medication, has been shown to improve medication adherence and treatment outcomes<sup>14</sup>. Tailoring the treatment vehicle to the individual patient<sup>15</sup>, as well as arranging follow-up visits shortly after treatment initiation<sup>16</sup> could be other partial solutions.

Inequalities in the provision and quality of health services must also be tackled, including the whole-time equivalent consultant:population ratio, which was scarcely achieved in 2011, and the provision of valuable specialist dermatological nurses in relevant departments<sup>17</sup>.

Finally, primary care remains a highly significant area to address. Since 24% of GP consultations relate to skin conditions, it is worrying that there is evidence suggesting inadequate management of these conditions<sup>18</sup>, likely in part due to a lack of appropriate training. Regular seminars run by dermatologists for GPs to refresh their knowledge and be updated on new treatments for skin conditions would likely be beneficial, and a drive for

better medical education might even expand to include a more extensive dermatology rotation in medical school.

In conclusion, the important challenge of achieving and maintaining healthy skin for all is a complex and multifactorial issue. Primary prevention, empowering the patient, improving patient adherence to medication, adequate provision and quality of health services and dermatology in primary care have all been discussed, and possible solutions to consider in each of these areas have been suggested. By incorporating these strategies into a comprehensive and executable plan, we can take a positive step towards achieving healthy skin for all.

(593 words)

## References

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