

Wait Time for Appointments

Anticipating future needs and demands for health care providers has proven to be a tricky business. Throughout my career, I have seen projections for an oversupply of dermatologists result in cuts in the number of residency slots to prevent the training of unneeded and presumably underemployed skin specialists. Recently, we have seen a 180° turn, where dire predictions now suggest a looming shortage of not only dermatologists, but physicians in general. The numbers certainly look daunting. The United States Census Bureau reports there are currently approximately 36 million citizens aged 65 years or older. By 2030, that number is projected to grow to 72 million.¹ These individuals tend to have more medical problems, requiring more care from physicians; yet, there is no plan to increase the number of dermatologists. One must wonder, who will take care of all these senior citizens?

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A recent article addressing the wait time for medical care versus cosmetic concerns recently caught my eye.² Mock patients called dermatology offices around the country and requested an appointment for either a changing mole or botulinum toxin type A injections. Although there was quite a bit of variability by location, as a general

trend the wait time for a changing mole was quite a bit longer than that for a botulinum toxin type A injection (mean, 26 days versus 8 days, respectively).

The authors could not explain why there was an observed difference, but they did speculate that physicians kept extra open appointment slots reserved for patients with cosmetic concerns. The implications of this explanation are that dermatologists value patients with cosmetic concerns over and at the expense of medical patients, including one with a possible melanoma. I interpret this study differently. To me, it implies that dermatologists are simply very busy and their appointment calendars are quite full. If dermatologists say the next open appointment is in 30 days, they are fully booked and are indeed busy. If they are willing to add extra patients into an already full schedule by doubling up, coming in early, or staying late, then it is a testament to their willingness to work extra hard to develop the cosmetic side of their practices. The more important lesson from this study is that dermatologists are booked a full month in advance, a situation likely to get worse. Training more dermatologists will take a decade or more to have an impact, so it is time to seriously consider this issue now.

James M. Spencer, MD, MS
New York, NY

References

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