



Skin Cancer Doesn't Discriminate

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Introduction

According to Cureus Journal of Medical Science (2023), skin cancer in people of color is often diagnosed at later stages in comparison to their Caucasian counterparts. Why that is comes down to factors such as misconceptions relating to skin cancer, insufficient data for non-caucasian populations, and limited educational resources.

Background & Explanation

Melanin, the cells that produce the skin's color, provides the skin with protection from the ultraviolet rays that cause skin cancer. With higher melanin content, means more protection from UV rays. This, in turn, can be seen through the higher rates of skin cancer in Caucasian individuals, and a significantly lower rate in persons of color. For example, Melanoma is a type of skin cancer that appears in melanin cells. According to the American Cancer Society (2025), the risk for Melanoma in one's lifetime is 3% for White individuals, 0.1% in Black individuals, and 0.5% in Hispanic individuals. However, while melanin in darker skin provides more protection from UV rays than lighter skin, the mortality rate for skin cancers in darker skinned individuals is much higher than those with lighter skin. Cureus Journal of Medical Science (2023) states that the 5-year survival rates for Melanoma show that at about 89%, White individuals have the highest survival rate, while Black individuals have about a 72% survival rate despite mostly having the highest content of melanin, and in turn UV protection.

Real-World Impact

If darker skin is more resistant to UV radiation than lighter skin, why is it that the mortality rate is higher? One of the main causes for this high mortality rate is late stage diagnosis. A study conducted by the BMJ Open shows that of five major themes relating to Melanoma awareness, four of them had to do with either misinformation, limited data, or lack of understanding of skin cancer. The first theme showed that individuals were unfamiliar with the term Melanoma and the features that came with it. The second theme showed that these individuals did not feel at risk, often citing that they heard that people of color could not get skin cancer. The third theme showed that these individuals did not know fully where skin cancer could appear. The final theme displayed that while they may have known about skin cancer, awareness messages were not diverse and did not feel relevant to them, as white individuals were often the center of these messages. All of these themes go hand in hand as to why people of color are increasingly diagnosed later than those of Caucasian ancestry. Moreover, the article goes on to report that 47% of Dermatologists interviewed stated that during their training, they were not exposed to a sufficient number of patients with darker skin tones. This lack of diversity within the medical field compiled with the insufficient educational resources and misconceptions about skin cancer allow not only late stage diagnosis but an overall increase in mortality among patients of color.

Conclusion

Frequently in the medical field, educational resources such as textbooks, infomercials, and more do not display diverse peoples and perspectives. Subsequently, this leads to not only misinformation among individuals that can be affected, but also a lack of understanding within healthcare professionals. This specific instance within Dermatology is just one example of many as to how important diversity is within healthcare. In order for the healthcare industry to further itself, it must allow for diversity to flourish, as it not only benefits the individuals that are being treated, but also furthers knowledge among the professionals responsible for treatment. By allowing for diversity in healthcare, more lives can be saved everyday.

References

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