



TELEDERMATOLOGY

TELEDERMATOLOGY IN THE UNITED STATES

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Teledermatology has evolved in the US since the early 1990's. Although initially used to deliver skin care to remote populations, in the 21st century, teledermatology has expanded to a variety of programs to meet the growing demand for dermatologic expertise. In a country where one third of primary care visits are for skin disorders, there is an undersupply of dermatologists. Most dermatologists practice in cosmopolitan areas with academic institutions with a ratio of 3.4 dermatologists for each 100,000 population. In rural areas there are only .085 dermatologists per 100,000 population. Teledermatology may be essential to meet the increasing demand for specialists in skin care.

The practice of teledermatology is constantly changing with the rapid advancement of telecommunication technology, the development of innovative teledermatology applications, and with changes in telemedicine law and reimbursement rules.

A nationwide survey was done in 2016 to evaluate the state of teledermatology programs in the US with regard to practice settings, patient volume and payment methods. Governmental programs (active military and the Veteran's Administration) were differentiated from non-governmental programs, which were associated with academic, private practice, medical groups and other practice settings.

There were 40 active non-governmental programs, an overall 18% increase from a previous survey in 2011 with a median annual consultation volume of 263 patients. Half of these programs were in academia. The most frequent reimbursement method was self-payment (53%). 70% of the programs provided direct to patient care and 78% provided service only within their home state. Store and forward remained the most commonly used teledermatology service modality.

The active military use of teledermatology was not examined, but the Veteran's Administration (VA) programs were examined separately from the non-governmental programs. Within the VA network, there were 62 separate programs performing over 100,000 consultations in 2016.

Specific challenges in teledermatology in the US include ensuring the quality of care delivered with established programs and with the novel platforms such as direct to patient virtual consultation programs and mobile self-care applications, overcoming reimbursement barriers and legal issues posed by variations in each state's policy on telehealth, and the slow adoption of teledermatology by providers because of reimbursement as well as other operational challenges.

