Barriers to dermatologic ultrasound: A national survey of dermatologists in the US Veterans Affairs health care system

To the Editor: Dermatologic ultrasound (DUS) can aid in the management of several skin conditions, including evaluation of benign neoplasms, presurgical planning of skin cancers, evaluation and treatment of scarring conditions, staging of inflammatory disorders, and evaluation of cosmetic fillers. In 2016, the Dermatologic Ultrasound group, an international collaboration of physicians, published guidelines to standardize the performance and quality of DUS exams. Though guidelines have been published, how dermatologists currently use DUS around the world is unknown. To better understand current use, training needs, and barriers to DUS in the United States, we conducted a national survey of dermatology services in the Veterans Affairs (VA) health care system.

A prospective observational study of all dermatology services at VA medical centers (VAMCs) was conducted between June 2019 and March 2020 using a web-based survey developed by a multidisciplinary group. The survey was first sent to all chiefs of staff (n = 130) of VAMCs followed by all chiefs of dermatology to obtain specialty-level data on DUS use, training, workflows, and equipment availability.

All VAMCs with dermatology services were surveyed (n = 93), and 87 dermatology chiefs completed surveys (94% response rate). Among the 87 dermatology chiefs who responded, only one (1.1%) indicated current use of DUS by their group for foreign body examination, bursa injection, venous malformations, and cysts. Lack of training was a top barrier to DUS use (Table I), and 40% of dermatology chiefs would support either sending their dermatologists to attend a national ultrasound course or an onsite training course at their facility. Only 9% of chiefs were aware of specific training opportunities available in DUS. Two chiefs (2.3%) reported desire for training in specific diagnostic applications, including evaluation of cellulitis, foreign bodies, abscess, neck mass, and lymph nodes, and procedural guidance for bursa injections, abscess drainage, and treatment of venous malformations. No dermatology chiefs reported existing policies on DUS use, equipment maintenance, or image archiving.

The main limitation of our data is dermatology services only in the VA health care system were surveyed. However, our data represent dermatology practices in urban, rural, community, and academic settings since the VA is the largest integrated health care system in the United States and is staffed by dermatologists who practice in both VA and non-VA facilities.

Table I. Barriers to dermatologic ultrasound use per dermatology chiefs in the Veterans Affairs health system

| Barrier | Number of dermatology chiefs reporting barrier (N = 87)
<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of trained providers</td>
<td>32 (37%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of funding for training</td>
<td>15 (17%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of training opportunities</td>
<td>14 (16%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of funding for travel</td>
<td>8 (9%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>At least one of the training barriers listed above</td>
<td>32 (37%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Equipment</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of ultrasound equipment</td>
<td>26 (30%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of funding for US equipment</td>
<td>15 (17%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>At least one of the equipment barriers listed above</td>
<td>26 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infrastructure</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>No clinician champion</td>
<td>18 (21%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of funding for support staff</td>
<td>15 (17%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of funding for simulation space</td>
<td>10 (11%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of privileging criteria</td>
<td>9 (10%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of facility leadership support</td>
<td>7 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of image archiving</td>
<td>7 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of standard reporting form</td>
<td>6 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least one of the infrastructure barriers listed above</td>
<td>23 (26%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No barriers identified</td>
<td>12 (14%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>No perceived benefit or no/limited utility for dermatology</td>
<td>59 (68%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Despite the potential benefits, few dermatologists currently use DUS due to lack of training, equipment, or infrastructure. Most important, lack of awareness of the clinical applications and potential benefits of DUS is a critical initial barrier to use as demonstrated by 68% of dermatology chiefs responding that there was little benefit or utility for ultrasound in dermatology. Other comments from dermatology chiefs included, “We would be interested in learning more if this is an evolving technology that could improve our practice.” To address the training gap, the Dermatologic Ultrasound group published basic, intermediate, and advanced curricula to help dermatologists learn DUS around the world. However, hands-on training courses are scarce and limited geographically to a few countries that have clinicians with expertise in DUS.

DUS has unique utility in the management of skin conditions and has gained interest internationally. Currently, few dermatologists use DUS in the United States, primarily due to lack of training. Development of hands-on DUS training courses is needed to facilitate implementation into practice by dermatologists worldwide.

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Conflicts of interest

None disclosed.

REFERENCES


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