

Five Practical Tips For Better Pediatric Dermatology Consultations

To provide effective consultation, understand issues from the perspective of patients and maintain good communication.

By Mark Eddy, MD

A subspecialty consult can prove invaluable to a physician in general practice and the patients he or she serves. When it comes to pediatric skin disease, dermatologists can play a critical role in rendering an accurate diagnosis, contributing to the treatment plan, or collaborating on long-term care. Despite the importance of consults, there's no standard to guide them, although several authors have proposed general guidelines. Here, I will attempt to outline specific tips to improve Pediatric Dermatology consultations.

Drawing from my background as a practicing primary care physician (General Pediatrics) and sub-specialist of Pediatric Endocrinology at an urban, university-based Midwestern children's hospital, I have reviewed the literature—mostly the Internal Medicine literature—in attempts to distill essential elements of an exemplary subspecialty consult. While researching, I realized that I should strive harder to practice more what I intend to preach. At the outset, I should also point out that communication from the referring physician to the consulting physician regarding the purpose of the specialty office visit and pertinent clinical patient information is just as important as any element mentioned below.

Consultation Tips

Diagnosis and Treatment. This should be self-evident: Rashes are a common reason for office visits in the primary care setting. However, not all skin conditions are easily recognizable and current treat-

ment recommendations are not always available, even to the most experienced primary care physician. Alternatively, parents may request a Pediatric Dermatology consult for a variety of reasons, including confirmation of the primary care physician's diagnosis, more advanced treatment, or simply reassurance. In any case, a clear description of the diagnosis, specific treatment recommendations (medications, dosages, duration of treatment, potential side effects), and plans for follow-up are essential.

Be Instructive. Frankly, my knowledge of dermatologic nomenclature is not what it should be. A brief review of how the pertinent clinical findings (macules, papules, nodules, etc.) support the diagnosis, refute alternative diagnoses, and the therapeutic rationale are always greatly appreciated. Citing relevant medical literature or a recent review article leaves an expert impression.

Collegial, prompt, succinct correspondence. Although seemingly trivial, a personalized greeting with a supportive tone in a referral letter is not overlooked. Managing a busy practice, documenting patient encounters completely, and meeting compliance requirements seem only to work against these nuances of letter writing. However, it remains incumbent upon both the referring and consulting physicians to communicate effectively and in a timely manner to facilitate patient care. The frequency of miscommunication remains a frustrating problem even in this technological age.

Impart perspective. I think that this

is the most challenging aspect of the job whether for the physician or the family. I can't count the number of times that after a subspecialty visit (not necessarily a dermatologist), the parent's impression was "The doctor said nothing was wrong." Framing discussion of the diagnosis and treatment options, answering questions, or addressing families' concerns is time-consuming but merits our attention. When available, patient literature or referral to knowledgeable websites is helpful; this information provides time-efficient self-education references for families and physicians, following an office visit.

Patience. Families and physicians seek expertise and empathy, for both life-threatening and trivial concerns. After all my training and lecturing to students and residents, I still must remind myself of this. It's one of the unspoken yet highly important aspect of the job and is crucial in opening the door for good communication between patients and physicians.

Gaining Perspective

These tips remind us of the importance of Pediatric Dermatology consults. Dermatologists should recognize the needs and limitations of pediatricians and allow for effective communication and understanding. Dermatologists and pediatricians must remember why we consult to begin with and consider the perspective of the patient and his or her family. In the end, effective communication amongst physicians and families becomes the most important feature and contributes to improved patient care. 