Study Shows Over 200 Mobile Apps Related to Dermatology

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But doctors urge caution to avoid inaccuracy

A surge of mobile apps related to dermatology has allowed scores of smart phone users to track and diagnose a wide range of skin diseases but doctors are urging caution, according to a study published today in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

"There are 229 dermatological applications out there and most are free," said Robert Dellavalle, MD, PhD, MSPH, senior author of the study and Associate Professor of Dermatology at the University of Colorado School of Medicine. "Yet this is an area of buyer beware because there are no regulations and no guarantees that these apps are providing accurate medical information."

The study found mobile applications for monitoring psoriasis, connecting people with patient organizations, diagnosing melanoma, dispensing sun screen advice, dermatology education and skin medications.

Self-surveillance/diagnosis apps vary widely in capabilities. Some allow patients to document lesions, upload and receive dermatologist or algorithm-based feedback about the malignancy potential of lesions, follow diagnosis algorithms and log personal treatment regimens.

Others are focused on a single malady like acne, rosacea, psoriasis or eczema. Patients and doctors can interface on apps and one lets users get pathology results from their phone. Another, Dr. Mole, allows users to photograph a mole and monitor its changes over time to determine if it's cancerous.

The 10 most reviewed apps included:

1. Ultraviolet-UV Index
2. VisualDx
3. SPF
4. iSore
5. SpotMole
6. Pocket Derm
7. Skin Scan
8. Doctor Mole
9. What's My Rash?
10. Skin Conditions

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration announced Monday that it would only regulate the small number of apps that act like medical instruments, those that perform ultrasounds or other procedures.

Dellavalle, Chief of Dermatology at the Denver Veterans Affairs Medical Center, said the rise in medical apps in general and dermatology in particular offers the chance to expand care into rural and underserved populations.

They may also help mitigate the shortage of dermatologists nationwide. Still, he urged people to use common sense.

"There is a huge expansion of medical apps across all disciplines now. This will require some caution by users but it also opens up new opportunities," he said. "I think most apps are generally safe right now, but I would not rely solely on them. I would cross-reference them with other apps, other people and with your doctor."

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