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TELEDERMATOLOGY AS A DIGITAL TOOL FOR IMPROVING ACCESS TO DERMATOLOGICAL CARE: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Teledermatology has become one of the fastest-growing areas of digital health and telemedicine, significantly transforming the delivery of dermatological services worldwide. Because dermatology relies heavily on visual assessment, it is particularly suitable for remote healthcare models. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of teledermatology and highlighted its potential to improve access to specialist care, especially in underserved, rural, and resource-limited settings.

Aim: This literature review aims to summarize current evidence regarding teledermatology, including its clinical applications, diagnostic effectiveness, patient and provider satisfaction, advantages, limitations, and future perspectives.

Methods: A comprehensive literature search was conducted using PubMed, Scopus, Google Scholar, and Web of Science for studies published between 2000 and March 2025. Particular emphasis was placed on literature published from 2020 to 2025, reflecting the accelerated development and implementation of teledermatology during the COVID-19 and post-pandemic period. Search terms included “teledermatology,” “telemedicine,” “digital health,” “access to care,” “patient satisfaction,” “store-and-forward,” “synchronous,” “asynchronous,” “artificial intelligence,” and “diagnostic concordance.” Original studies, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and narrative reviews evaluating teledermatology outcomes, diagnostic accuracy, implementation barriers, and cost-effectiveness were included. A total of 36 studies were selected for qualitative synthesis.

Results: Teledermatology significantly improves access to dermatologic care by reducing waiting times, minimizing travel requirements, and supporting healthcare delivery in underserved populations. Both synchronous (live video) and asynchronous (store-and-forward) models demonstrate moderate-to-high diagnostic concordance with face-to-face consultations. Asynchronous systems are particularly efficient and cost-effective, especially when clinician-captured images are used. High levels of patient and provider satisfaction are consistently reported, driven by convenience and improved accessibility. Teledermatology has demonstrated effectiveness in inflammatory skin diseases, skin cancer screening, pediatric dermatology, inpatient consultation, emergency settings, and chronic disease follow-up. Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence may further enhance triage and diagnostic support. However, limitations remain, including image quality variability, digital literacy disparities, privacy concerns, technological barriers, and inconsistent reimbursement policies.

Conclusion: Teledermatology is a clinically effective and patient-accepted digital healthcare tool that can substantially improve access to dermatologic services. Hybrid care models integrating synchronous and asynchronous approaches may represent the future standard of care. Continued investment in digital infrastructure, patient education, equitable access strategies, and standardized regulatory frameworks will be essential for sustainable implementation and future development of teledermatology worldwide.

KEYWORDS

Teledermatology, Telemedicine, Digital Health, Access to Care, Patient Satisfaction, Store-and-Forward, Artificial Intelligence, Dermatology

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1. Introduction

Digital transformation has become an essential component of modern healthcare systems. Advances in information and communication technologies have enabled the rapid expansion of telemedicine services, providing opportunities to overcome geographic, organizational, and workforce-related barriers to healthcare access [1–3]. Among medical specialties, dermatology is uniquely suited to remote healthcare delivery because diagnosis and treatment decisions are largely based on visual examination of skin lesions and clinical imaging [1,3].

Teledermatology refers to the use of telecommunications technologies to exchange medical information concerning skin diseases for diagnosis, consultation, treatment, prevention, and education at a distance [2,4]. Although the concept of teledermatology has existed for more than two decades, its implementation accelerated dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic, when traditional face-to-face consultations became limited due to infection control measures and healthcare system burden [8,13,19]. During this period, teledermatology

emerged as a critical tool for maintaining continuity of care while minimizing unnecessary patient exposure and reducing pressure on healthcare facilities [8,11,13,30].

Two principal teledermatology models are currently utilized: synchronous teledermatology, involving real-time video consultations, and asynchronous store-and-forward (SAF) teledermatology, in which clinical information and images are submitted electronically for later evaluation [10,11]. Both methods have demonstrated moderate-to-high diagnostic concordance compared with in-person dermatologic assessment [1,21,24]. SAF systems are particularly attractive because of their lower technological requirements, flexibility, and ability to support large patient volumes [10,22]. Synchronous approaches, meanwhile, may improve patient engagement and allow immediate clarification of clinical concerns [11].

Teledermatology has demonstrated effectiveness across a broad range of dermatologic conditions, including acne vulgaris, atopic dermatitis, psoriasis, chronic ulcers, pigmentary disorders, and skin cancer screening [6–9,33,34]. Inflammatory dermatoses are particularly well suited for follow-up through telemedicine because disease progression can often be monitored visually [6–8]. Furthermore, teledermatology has proven valuable in triage systems, emergency departments, correctional facilities, inpatient dermatology consultations, and rural healthcare settings where access to dermatologists is limited [14,18,29].

Patient satisfaction with teledermatology is generally high and is associated with convenience, shorter waiting times, reduced travel costs, and improved healthcare accessibility [13,15,26]. Providers also recognize the benefits of teledermatology in improving workflow efficiency and optimizing specialist referral systems [11,31]. Pediatric teledermatology studies similarly report high satisfaction rates and acceptable diagnostic accuracy, supporting its use in children and adolescents [16].

Despite these advantages, several challenges continue to limit widespread implementation. Diagnostic accuracy may be affected by inadequate image quality, lighting, or incomplete clinical information [10,23]. Teledermatology also cannot fully replace physical examination procedures such as palpation or dermoscopy in certain clinical situations [21]. Additional concerns include privacy and data security, medico-legal liability, reimbursement variability, technological infrastructure limitations, and disparities related to digital literacy and socioeconomic status [8,18–20,35].

Recent developments in artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning may further transform teledermatology by supporting automated triage, lesion classification, image quality assessment, and clinical decision-making [28]. However, integration of AI into teledermatology platforms requires careful evaluation regarding diagnostic reliability, ethical considerations, and algorithmic bias across diverse patient populations and skin phototypes.

Given the rapidly expanding role of teledermatology in clinical practice, an updated review of current evidence is necessary. This literature review evaluates teledermatology as a digital tool for improving access to dermatological care, focusing on clinical applications, effectiveness, patient and provider perspectives, implementation challenges, and future directions.

2. Methods

A comprehensive literature search was conducted using PubMed, Scopus, Google Scholar, and Web of Science databases for studies published between January 2000 and March 2025. Particular emphasis was placed on literature published from 2020 to 2025, reflecting the accelerated development and implementation of teledermatology during the COVID-19 and post-pandemic period.

Search terms included combinations of: “teledermatology,” “telemedicine,” “digital health,” “access to care,” “patient satisfaction,” “store-and-forward,” “synchronous,” “asynchronous,” “artificial intelligence,” “skin cancer,” and “diagnostic concordance.”

Eligible publications included original clinical studies, retrospective and prospective cohort studies, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, consensus statements, and narrative reviews evaluating the effectiveness, diagnostic accuracy, patient or provider satisfaction, healthcare accessibility, implementation barriers, and cost-effectiveness of teledermatology. Studies concerning inflammatory dermatoses, skin cancer screening, pediatric teledermatology, inpatient consultations, and underserved populations were also included.

Articles were screened based on title, abstract, and full-text relevance. Non-English publications were excluded unless an English abstract was available. Duplicate records and studies lacking sufficient methodological or outcome data were removed.

A total of 36 articles were selected for qualitative synthesis and included in this review.

3. Applications of Teledermatology

3.1 Diagnostic and Clinical Management

Teledermatology enables remote diagnosis and management of multiple dermatologic conditions. SAF systems allow patients or healthcare professionals to submit clinical photographs and medical histories electronically for specialist evaluation [6,7,22]. Studies demonstrate diagnostic concordance rates comparable to face-to-face consultations, particularly for inflammatory skin diseases and chronic dermatoses [1,6,21].

Clinician-acquired images generally provide superior diagnostic reliability compared with patient-submitted photographs because of improved image quality and standardized imaging techniques [10,23]. Teledermatology is increasingly utilized for acne, psoriasis, atopic dermatitis, rosacea, and medication monitoring [6–8].

3.2 Skin Cancer Screening and Oncology

Teledermatology plays an expanding role in skin cancer triage and melanoma screening [17,33,34]. Early detection through teledermatology may improve access to specialist evaluation and reduce delays in diagnosis. Several studies report acceptable sensitivity and specificity for teledermatology-based melanoma assessment when high-quality images are available [17,33].

AI-supported teledermatology systems may further improve early lesion detection and prioritization of high-risk patients [28].

3.3 Triage and Follow-Up

Teledermatology functions effectively as a triage system, enabling primary care physicians to identify cases requiring specialist referral while managing less severe conditions locally [14,29]. Follow-up visits conducted remotely reduce unnecessary clinic attendance, improve adherence to therapy, and decrease travel burden for patients [8,16].

3.4 Pediatric and Special Populations

Pediatric teledermatology studies demonstrate diagnostic concordance ranging from 70% to 89% and high patient or parent satisfaction [16]. Teledermatology is also used successfully in correctional facilities, rural healthcare centers, nursing homes, and emergency departments where access to dermatologists is limited [14,18].

4. Models and Effectiveness

4.1 Asynchronous (Store-and-Forward)

SAF teledermatology is the most widely implemented model because it requires lower bandwidth and greater scheduling flexibility [10,22]. Studies show moderate-to-high diagnostic concordance and substantial reductions in unnecessary referrals [1,10].

4.2 Synchronous (Live Video)

Synchronous teledermatology allows real-time interaction between patients and clinicians. Advantages include immediate communication, patient reassurance, and enhanced educational opportunities [11]. Limitations include variable video quality, technical challenges, and greater infrastructure requirements.

4.3 Comparative Effectiveness

Both synchronous and asynchronous systems demonstrate cost-effectiveness and clinical utility [24,25]. Hybrid models combining both approaches may provide optimal flexibility and diagnostic support.

5. Patient and Provider Perspectives

Patient satisfaction in teledermatology is consistently high because of convenience, shorter waiting times, and reduced transportation requirements [13,15,26]. Providers appreciate workflow efficiency and expanded access but continue to report concerns regarding reimbursement, medico-legal issues, and image quality [11,31].

Digital literacy disparities remain important barriers among elderly, socioeconomically disadvantaged, and rural populations [19,20,35].

6. Challenges and Limitations

Major limitations of teledermatology include:

- Technical barriers: connectivity issues, device limitations, and software usability [19,21]
- Image quality: variability between patient and clinician-submitted images affects diagnostic confidence [10,23]
- Limited physical examination capability [21]
- Privacy and cybersecurity concerns [18]
- Reimbursement and regulatory inconsistencies [24,31]
- Digital inequities and limited technological access [20,35]

7. Future Directions and Discussion

Teledermatology is expected to remain an integral component of dermatologic care beyond the COVID-19 era. Hybrid systems integrating SAF and synchronous consultations may optimize healthcare accessibility while maintaining diagnostic quality [21,22,24].

Artificial intelligence represents one of the most promising future developments in teledermatology. AI-assisted algorithms may support automated lesion recognition, image quality control, and triage prioritization [28]. Such technologies could improve diagnostic efficiency and facilitate earlier detection of malignant lesions.

Future implementation strategies should focus on improving digital infrastructure, patient education, multilingual accessibility, and equitable healthcare delivery [19,20,35]. Standardized international guidelines and reimbursement policies may further support sustainable integration of teledermatology into healthcare systems [8,24,31].

Additional prospective multicenter studies are needed to evaluate long-term outcomes, cost-effectiveness, diagnostic accuracy, and patient-reported experiences across diverse populations [29,36].

8. Conclusions

Teledermatology is a clinically effective, patient-centered, and cost-efficient digital healthcare solution that significantly improves access to dermatologic services. Both asynchronous and synchronous models provide valuable support for diagnosis, triage, and follow-up care. Although technological, educational, and regulatory challenges remain, continued advancements in digital medicine and artificial intelligence are likely to further expand the role of teledermatology in global healthcare systems.

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