Representation Matters

Minorities are rarely shown in TV ads for medications for certain skin conditions and may be getting less optimal treatment as a result.

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While people of color commonly suffer from psoriasis and eczema, they are less likely to be portrayed in TV commercials for medications that target these skin conditions. This underrepresentation may contribute to unconscious bias among clinicians and unawareness of treatment options among patients, suggest new findings published in the journal Cutis, reports Penn Medicine News.

For the investigation, researchers from the University of Pennsylvania watched commercials that aired on major TV networks from 5 p.m. to 6 p.m. for 14 consecutive days. Of a total 40 commercials for psoriasis and eczema medications, 81 characters represented people with psoriasis and 80 represented those with eczema.

Results showed that 93% of the characters in the psoriasis commercials and 54% of the characters in the eczema ads were white.

“There is still a lot of speculation around why Black patients and those of other nonwhite racial and ethnic backgrounds are less likely to be treated for psoriasis or eczema with the most effective medications,” said Alexis Holmes, a fourth-year medical student in the Perelman School of Medicine and lead author of the study. “We don’t know if clinicians are less likely to offer the medications to their nonwhite patients, if patients are not aware that the medications could work for them and are therefore not asking their clinicians about the drugs or if there are other issues like accessibility.”

Scientists acknowledged that multiple variables likely play a role in why more white patients get pharmaceutical treatments for these conditions, including direct-to-consumer ads aimed at the general public.

Researchers hope these findings will not only encourage advertisers to represent a broader spectrum of individuals in their ads who could benefit from their products but also serve to educate clinicians about possible biases in their practices caused by such advertising.

“If clinicians recognize that these ads may contribute to gaps in knowledge about available treatments among racial and ethnic minorities, they can play an important role in filling these

gaps by spending a few extra minutes discussing treatment with these patients," said Junko Takeshita, MD, PhD, an assistant professor of dermatology and epidemiology at Penn Medicine and a senior author of the study.

For related coverage, read "Black Children Less Likely to Get Treatment for Eczema" and "Your Complexion Can Affect Diseases and Disorders of the Skin."

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