

## Missing the mark on patient comprehension



*To the Editor:* We read with great interest the discussion by Neill et al<sup>1</sup> on patient comprehension of commonly used terms in dermatology.

We agree that this is a very important and often overlooked issue in the field of medicine<sup>2</sup> and specifically dermatology. We conducted a similar survey study at Boston Medical Center and published our findings in 2019.<sup>3</sup> Neill et al<sup>1</sup> tested patient comprehension of 11 terms commonly used in the field of dermatology, 7 of which overlap with our 2019 survey study<sup>3</sup> (*biopsy, excision, lesion, malignant, benign, melanoma, and metastasis*). Our survey findings were in support of Neill et al's, with female sex and higher education being associated with higher levels of patient comprehension.<sup>1,3</sup> Age was not a significant factor in levels of comprehension in either study.<sup>1,3</sup> Despite differences in sample population demographics, both tested cohorts were most challenged by the word *metastasis*.<sup>1,3</sup>

Both studies highlight the importance of provider awareness of possible patient-provider miscommunications due to the use of medical jargon.<sup>1,3</sup> Past studies have determined that providers are often missing opportunities to explain medical terminology; a content analysis of 16 transcribed medical encounters showed that providers did not explain the majority (79%) of the medical terms they introduced.<sup>4</sup> More concerning, patients are unlikely to disclose whether they comprehend the terminology being used in medical encounters or not<sup>4,5</sup>; transcribed encounters showed that patients rarely asked for clarification when medical terminology was introduced, giving providers little reason to believe that they had misunderstood any part of their encounter.<sup>4</sup>

This further suggests that the impetus is on providers to elaborate and clarify medical terminology as they introduce it, without the expectation that patients will explicitly inquire about terminology that they do not understand. Given the low rates of

patient comprehension for *metastasis* and some of the other terminology tested by Neill et al<sup>1</sup> and Sanchez et al,<sup>3</sup> providers in the field of dermatology may benefit from explaining these terms in all of their future patient encounters.

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