



CHEUK YING (CHERRY) CHU

VIRGINIA TECH CARILION
SCHOOL OF MEDICINE
CLASS OF 2029

WHAT SKIN TEACHES US: LEARNING TO SEE BEYOND THE SURFACE

In most fields of medicine, disease hides.

It hides in laboratory values, imaging findings, and microscopic slides. Physicians learn to interpret numbers and shadows, indirect evidence of pathology unfolding somewhere deeper within the body.

Dermatology is different.

Dermatologic disease is visible.

At first glance, that visibility might seem like a clinical advantage. Lesions are often directly observable. Morphology can guide diagnosis within seconds. A trained dermatologist can recognize subtle patterns in distribution, color, scaling, and borders that transform a rash into a diagnosis.

But as a medical student beginning to explore dermatology, I've realized that visibility carries a different weight: dermatologic disease is not just visible to physicians. It is visible to everyone.

Skin is our most public organ.

Unlike hypertension or hyperlipidemia, dermatologic conditions cannot be concealed in lab reports or tucked away in imaging studies. They are carried openly on the face, hands, scalp, and arms, the very surfaces through which we interact with the world. For many patients, skin disease becomes inseparable from identity, self-perception, and social experience.

During my early exposure to dermatology, I began to appreciate how deeply this visibility shapes patient lives. Conditions such as psoriasis, vitiligo, acne, and alopecia areata are often framed medically in terms of inflammation, autoimmunity, or follicular dysfunction. Yet for patients, the most profound impact may not be biologic.

It is social.

A lesion on the cheek can change how someone feels walking into a room. Hair loss can alter how someone recognizes themselves in the mirror. Chronic skin disease can quietly reshape confidence, relationships, and even career decisions. It can make everyday interactions feel charged with self-consciousness. It can make a person feel visible in the worst way.

The skin does not just reflect disease. It also reflects vulnerability.

In many specialties, patients can keep their illness private for a while. A diagnosis may remain within the exam room, in the chart, or in the laboratory. In dermatology, that distance often does not exist. Skin disease can announce itself before a patient ever speaks. It can shape first impressions before a history is taken, before symptoms are explained, before the patient has had the chance to define themselves beyond what others can see.

Dermatology therefore asks physicians to develop a different kind of clinical vision.

It is not enough to simply identify morphology. Dermatologists must also see the emotional and psychological landscape surrounding the disease. What appears to be a small plaque or patch may represent years of frustration, stigma, embarrassment, or exhaustion from failed treatments. A mild case on paper may feel enormous in a patient's daily life.

Dermatology is a specialty grounded in sharp visual skill, but it also demands sensitivity. It asks physicians to be precise observers while remaining deeply aware of the human meaning of what they observe.

In recent years, the field has made remarkable therapeutic advances. Targeted biologic therapies have transformed conditions like psoriasis and atopic dermatitis. Newer treatments continue to expand options for diseases that once left patients with few good answers. That progress is exciting.

But as the therapeutic arsenal grows more sophisticated, it is worth remembering that the core of dermatology remains profoundly human. Every treatment decision intersects with a patient's experience of being seen.

Dermatologists do more than improve skin clearance scores. They restore a sense of normalcy to daily life.

The ability to attend a social event without anxiety. To make eye contact without self-consciousness. To wake up without anticipating discomfort, judgment, or the need to explain one's appearance. These are not small outcomes. They are deeply human ones.

As a medical student, I find this intersection between visibility and vulnerability one of the most compelling aspects of dermatology. The skin tells stories of immune dysregulation, genetics, and environmental exposures, but it also tells stories of resilience, identity, and self-image.

Learning dermatology, then, is not simply learning to recognize rashes. It is learning how to see people more fully. Perhaps the greatest lesson dermatology offers students like me is this: when disease appears on the surface, the responsibility of the physician is not only to diagnose it. It is to understand what that visibility means for the patient who carries it.

