

INTERVIEW: 2025 CSPA Dermatologist of the Year



Canadian Skin Patient Alliance
Alliance canadienne des
patients en dermatologie

Dr. Marlene Dytoc

The Canadian Skin Patient Alliance (CSPA) relies on the contributions of exceptional dermatologists to support its mission of improving the lives of Canadians affected by skin, hair, and nail conditions. This year, we are proud to honor Dr. Marlene Dytoc as our Dermatologist of the Year and share our full, exclusive conversation regarding her clinical breakthroughs, quality improvement research, and dedication to patient-centered care.



How does it feel to be CSPA's dermatologist of the year? What does it mean to you?

I am very grateful to the CSPA for this great honour. We are indebted to Ms. Dana Gies in particular for her invaluable support and dissemination of our Mind Skin Canada patient educational videos to support the psychosocial impact of skin conditions and the Mind Skin Health Index for healthcare providers to screen for psychodermatologic conditions.

It is very inspiring to me and hopefully to those who work in Psychodermatology, Women's Health / Vulvar Dermatology and quality improvement (QI) research projects. We are motivated to enhance our patient care in a holistic way within and beyond our clinical practice. These include creation and validation of patient screening and educational tools to address the psychosocial impact of skin conditions in patients, designing and trialing expert-led patient support groups to demonstrate benefit to psychodermatology and vulvar patients, improving the dermatologic care pathway for psychodermatology and vulvar patients as well as Indigenous communities, and other QI projects promoting sun safety interventions in elementary schools. These initiatives are described below.

I hope that this award will imbue our medical residents and students, graduate and undergraduate students as well as postdoctoral fellows, to continue these pursuits.

What brought you to dermatology?

As I look back, I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to the University of Toronto professors in Dermatology during my medical school, especially Dr. Ben Fisher (with Dr. Peter Hacker) and Dr. Daniel Sauder. Dr. Fisher was an astute clinician who provided me with my first hands-on experiences in dermatologic care. It was by being entrusted to take care of patients that I realized a genuine sense of what a career in Dermatology would be like. Dr. Sauder provided me with exciting opportunities in immunology research at the time when cytokine therapies were relatively novel in dermatology. With my research background in cell biology and microbiology, I realized the myriad opportunities in Dermatology where I could combine clinical practice and research successfully. Following medical school, I was accepted into Dermatology residency at the University of Alberta with a strong focus on research in the program at the time. Dr. Alfons Krol and Dr. Gilles Lauzon were my mentors and support during my residency.

Inspired by these outstanding professors in Dermatology in both Alberta and Toronto, I have pursued a fulfilling career combining patient care, research and teaching/mentorship concurrently, in private practice and at the University of Alberta. As a young dermatologist, with bench research collaborations we investigated the cytokine-modulating properties of topical medications such as tacrolimus and imiquimod and repurposed these agents for off-label uses. In the last decade, I have been focusing on QI projects and recently reinitiated more bench research collaborations.

Presently I am very blessed to have another amazing support, the kindest mentorship of our esteemed Canadian dermatologist, Dr. Kirk Barber from Calgary who greatly inspires me to continue our Psychodermatology pursuits.

Can you tell me about a highlight of your work for or with patients?

I wish to highlight our quality improvement (QI) projects focused on Psychodermatology, sun safety in elementary schools, vulvar dermatology/women's health and improving the dermatologic care pathway in Indigenous communities and our monthly skin care educational program in Compassion House to support patients with cancer (skin products for patients regularly donated by Pierre Fabre Laboratories and L'Oreal Canada).

We have created the Mind Skin Health Index, the content of which is informed by a systematic review of psychodermatology screening tools and validated by Delphi consensus with experts and patients, to screen for the psychosocial impact of skin conditions as well as primary psychodermatologic diagnoses such as Delusion of Parasitosis and Skin Picking Disorder (grant funding by Pfizer Canada). We continue to perform psychometric confirmatory analyses and translate this tool in different languages including French, Mandarin and indigenous languages. This project is supported by Pfizer Canada and Sanofi Canada and goes on with the team of undergraduate and medical students, graduate student and postdoctoral fellow led by Dr. Parsa Abdi, Dr. Xiaonan Chen and Dr. Tarek Turk, with the collaboration of medical students Kevin Li, Zack Perala and graduate student Patrick (Ryan) Bangit.

Our Skin Health (Psychodermatology) clinic at the Kaye Edmonton clinic with our esteemed partner psychiatrists, Dermatology and Psychiatry residents as well as medical students provide the

real-world clinical setting for clinical innovation. In addition, in the Mind Skin Canada with dermatologists, psychiatrists, psychologists, medical students, graduate students and Dermatology residents across Canada (notably Dr. Kirk Barber, Dr. Simon Wong, Dr. Helene Veillette, Dr. Katherine Hibbard, Dr. Adam Abba-Aji, Dr. Esther Fujiwara, Dr. Chris Gorman, Dr. Lingsa Jia and Dr. Esther Fujiwara) we meet regularly to support each other. We have been developing a website www.mindskinhealth.ca created and managed by Mr. Chris Barber as a generous volunteer, Dr. Parsa Abdi (University of Alberta Dermatology resident) and Kevin Li (medical student) to hopefully attract more healthcare providers to this field and provide a resource library for both patients and healthcare providers to address primary and secondary psychodermatologic conditions.

We have been creating the Mind Skin Health educational videos to support the psychosocial impact of skin conditions in patients, starting with atopic dermatitis, led by medical students Kevin Li and Michelle Leung (grant funding by Pfizer Canada and Pierre Fabre Laboratories). The Mind Skin Health for Atopic Dermatitis educational modules are videos informed by a scoping review of the literature and an environmental scan and include practical techniques and tips such as habit reversal therapy, mindfulness and relaxation techniques to break the itch-scratch cycle. A randomized controlled trial utilizing these videos demonstrate trends towards improved quality of life and severity of eczema in patients who received the videos in the beginning of the study compared to the control group who received the videos at the end of the study. We are conducting a similar process to create educational tools supporting patients with other skin conditions which we found to have statistically significant psychosocial comorbidities such as hidradenitis suppurativa, psoriasis, chronic urticaria, alopecia areata and vitiligo.

Sunburns in childhood are a significant risk factor for skin cancer, and we have been working for years to promote sun safety interventions in elementary schools including videos on sun safety awareness during assemblies, online school newsletters and the use of sun safety items including sunscreens (provided by Beiersdorf, Kenvue, L'Oreal and Pierre Fabre Laboratories), in schools. These interventions resulted in significantly less sunburns in the elementary school classes versus the control classes. We are now in our 4th PDSA (Plan Do Study Act) cycle of this QI project led by Dr. Garrison Dyck and medical student Aakankshya Kharel.

We have also conducted expert-led (dermatologist and gynecologist) support groups for patients with lichen sclerosus and skin-picking disorders led by Aakankshya Kharel and Dr. Roshani Puri respectively. The former support group of patients has shown statistically significant improvement in their vulvar quality of life index (VQLI) compared with the control patient group in a randomized controlled trial. We have now partnered with the Lichen Sclerosus Support Network to sustain this initiative and participate in their global summit. We are also currently investigating the barriers and challenges in the care of lichen sclerosus led by medical student Quyen Pham.

We are working towards a partnership with Indigenous communities in Alberta, and in research collaboration with Dr. Ivan Litvinov, Dr. Sandra Pelaez and Dr. Jaggi Rao, to improve the dermatologic care pathway of Indigenous populations through telementoring and teledermatology. Informed by our scoping review and environmental scan, we aim to conduct focus groups with Indigenous communities aimed to address their unmet needs prior to the launch of our telementoring program in addition to existing teledermatology services.

We have been creating e-learning Powerpoint modules and case-based learning modules (led by Dr. Parsa Abdi with the University of Alberta Department of Medicine support) for the telementoring aspect of this project (grant funding from Sanofi Canada). We have a team of medical students and Dermatology residents participating and ensuring the sustainability of these projects currently led by medical students Eileen Tang and Kevin Li.

What's something you're excited about right now?

With collaboration, support and mentorship, we are most excited in making Psychodermatology and Vulvar Dermatology more mainstream and efficient in the care of our patients. This, along with promoting sun safety in schools and improving the dermatologic care of the Indigenous population, is the overarching goal of our patient-centered initiatives and QI projects.

I am also very enthused by the journey our undergraduate, graduate, medical students, post-doctoral fellows and Dermatology residents take in their early careers. It is an honour to participate in their milestones, and I am deeply grateful to them. I am inspired by their incredible enthusiasm, skills, and talents, enabling our projects to come to fruition. This exciting generation of extraordinary students and trainees will be part of our legacy and lead the trail-blazing future of Dermatology.

What's next for you?

We will be pursuing our future directions in each of the projects as described above and ensuring sustainability of these initiatives. I will continue with our Dermatology practice with a special interest in Psychodermatology, Vulvar Dermatology/Women's Health, quality improvement and community engagement, alongside research collaborations and teaching/mentorship.