Views and experiences of people with acne vulgaris and healthcare professionals about treatments: systematic review and thematic synthesis of qualitative research

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INTRODUCTION

Acne vulgaris is a common skin condition worldwide.1 It can have a substantial impact on quality of life both physically and psychologically.2 Treatments for mild to moderate acne are topical preparations including topical retinoids or adapalene, topical antibiotics, combination topicals and azelaic acid.3 If these are not effective, oral antibiotics are prescribed or, in women, combined oral contraception or cocompridol. More severe acne is treated with oral isotretinoin.3,4

Quantitative research has found that adherence to acne treatments is poor.5 This is primarily the case for topical treatments for reasons including side effects, young age and forgetfulness.5 While quantitative research is useful for determining the prevalence and common reasons given for non-adherence, qualitative research is essential
for understanding people’s views and perceptions around treatments and more fully understand barriers and facilitators to treatment adherence.

By synthesising qualitative research on acne, we can generate new understandings that go beyond the primary studies. This is useful for informing future research and for developing interventions to support people in effectively managing their condition.

The aim of this systematic review was to identify and synthesise qualitative papers exploring views and experiences of acne and its treatments among people with acne, their carers and healthcare professionals (HCPs).

METHODS

The Enhancing transparency in reporting the synthesis of qualitative research statement was used to facilitate appropriate reporting for this synthesis of qualitative studies.

Search strategy

Five databases were searched on 05 November 2019 using a comprehensive search strategy: Medline (1946–2019), EMBASE (1974–2019), PubMed (1996–2019), PsychINFO (1806–2019) and CINAHL (1981–2019). Databases were chosen to ensure that literature on nursing, social science, psychology and medicine were searched as comprehensively as possible. Other resources included backward and forward citation searching using Google Scholar, contacting authors of included papers regarding other articles or when full texts were unavailable.

The search strategy was developed through discussions with coauthors and a medical librarian at the University of Southampton. Searching for qualitative literature can be difficult and that is why we included a librarian and used the Information Specialists’ Sub-Group search filter resource to ensure that all relevant terms related to acne and qualitative research were covered (see online supplemental material A for the list of search terms). We defined qualitative as papers presenting qualitative method of data collection and analysis as well as presenting qualitative data (quotes). There were no date or language restrictions.

Eligible papers reported on studies that used qualitative methods of data collection and analysis, presented qualitative data either standalone or distinct part of a mixed-methods study, included people with acne, HCPs treating acne or carers/parents of children with acne and studies that considered more than one skin condition that included acne.

Selection process

Three independent researchers screened the title and abstracts of the papers (AI, DP and IM). AI conducted the full-text screening of eligible papers and any uncertainties were discussed with coauthors.

Quality appraisal

An adapted version of the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme tool was used to provide an indication of strengths and weaknesses of the qualitative papers. All papers were included regardless of quality. Papers were appraised by AI, and other members of the research team (AWAG, MS and IM) independently appraised a third of papers each. Disagreements in quality assessment were resolved through discussion.

Data extraction

Study characteristics extracted from each paper included: author(s), country, year of publication, focus, participants, skin conditions, data collection, methodology, analysis and key themes presented by the author. The papers were repeatedly read by AI to ensure that all quotes and relevant text under the ‘results’ or ‘findings’ were extracted onto NVivo V.11 software to manage and code the data.

Synthesis of findings

A thematic synthesis was carried out involving three stages. First AI carried out line-by-line coding of relevant text (quotes or authors’ descriptions). Next, the free codes were organised to develop descriptive themes across studies. A coding manual was produced to facilitate the systematic coding of the data. The themes identified were deliberated with IM, MS, AWAG and PL and any discrepancies were discussed until the agreement was reached. The third stage involved ‘going beyond’ the data to develop analytical themes that generate additional understanding from synthesising original studies. Analytical themes were produced through team discussions and a model was developed showing the interrelationship between themes and their association with treatment initiation (decision to start treatment) and adherence.

Patient and public involvement

No patients were involved in carrying out this systematic review. Following publication, results will be disseminated through lay summary and social media.

RESULTS

The database search identified 2931 records and seven papers were found through other resources (2519 after removing duplicates). After eligibility screening, 20 papers were included in the synthesis (figure 1).

Study characteristics

The included studies were relatively heterogeneous, primarily exploring the following topics: experiences living with acne, psychosocial impact of acne, complementary and alternative medicines (CAM), sexual life and acne, patients’ relationships with their doctors, views on causation of acne, perceptions of acne treatments, ambivalence and ambiguity in young people’s experience of acne and HCPs’ attitudes towards acne management. Methods of data collection included face-to-face, video or telephone interviews, written interviews online...
and searching online discussion forums. Studies were carried out in India, US, UK, Australia, Italy and Germany (table 1).

Quality appraisal results
The overall quality of the papers varied with longer articles providing more information for the checklist. Many of the studies did not explore reflexivity of the researcher in terms of their disciplinary knowledge and epistemological position. In addition, many of the papers did not include participant characteristics when presenting quotes. Some papers did not explicitly state the qualitative approach or a recognised approach to analysis. One paper reported findings from a commercial trial that could result in bias and therefore conclusions from this study should be drawn with caution.11

Synthesis of results
Four overarching analytical themes were further developed from descriptive themes generated in the line-by-line coding: (1) People with acne tended to view their condition as short-term, (2) impact of acne not recognised by HCPs, others or self, (3) people wanted to have a sense of control over acne treatments and acne and (4) a range of barriers to acne treatments and strategies to help cope with acne. Figure 2 presents how the analytical and descriptive themes influence people’s initiation and adherence to acne treatment. Table 2 presents a checklist of the studies that reported on each analytical theme. Example quotes or authors’ description of quotes are presented in table 3. General practitioners’ (GPs) views and perceptions are summarised separately as only one paper reported on this.

Acne is viewed as short-term
People with acne often seemed to view their condition as short-term and not requiring long-term treatment. Study participants commonly seemed to have little initial concern over their acne as they expected to ‘grow out

Figure 1 PRISMA flow diagram of search strategy and included papers.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study (country)</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Participants (sampling)</th>
<th>Skin condition(s)</th>
<th>Data collection, methodology and analysis</th>
<th>Key themes presented by author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>McNiven et al. 12 UK</td>
<td>Ambivalence and ambiguity in young people's experiences of acne</td>
<td>25 participants aged 13–25 years Primary care, secondary care, patient representative groups, universities, colleges, schools and social media platforms</td>
<td>Acne</td>
<td>In-depth qualitative interviews Coding reports were analysed conceptually by the author using a mind-mapping technique</td>
<td>Differences and ambiguities: understandings held about acne causes: negotiating connotations; a medical concern? Preferentially positioning 'acne' or 'spots'; and other people and health contexts: making comparisons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magin et al. 13 Australia</td>
<td>Views about the causes of acne and implications for acne management</td>
<td>26 participants with acne (13–52 years) Primary care, secondary care and community advertising</td>
<td>Acne</td>
<td>Semistructured interviews Grounded theory approach</td>
<td>Beliefs regarding acne causation; implications of these beliefs for acne management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ip et al. 14 UK</td>
<td>Views and experiences of acne treatments (topicals and oral antibiotics)</td>
<td>25 participants with acne aged 13–24 years Primary care, secondary care, patient representative Groups, universities, colleges, schools and social media platforms</td>
<td>Acne</td>
<td>Secondary analysis of primary interviews Thematic analysis</td>
<td>Perception of acne; perception of treatments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koo 15 USA</td>
<td>Psychological impact of acne</td>
<td>Not stated</td>
<td>Acne</td>
<td>Interviews Not labelled</td>
<td>The psychosocial effect; acne and functional status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fabbrocini et al. 16 UK, Italy, and Germany</td>
<td>Impact of acne and attributes to topical treatments</td>
<td>34 adolescents aged 12–17 years and 16 adults aged 18–47 years with moderate–severe acne who were currently/ recently prescribed topical treatment Recruited through a specialist recruitment panel</td>
<td>Acne</td>
<td>In-depth, semi-structured telephone interviews Thematic analysis</td>
<td>Impact on their quality of life; attributes of topical treatments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murray and Rhodes 17 UK (users from USA, Australia, Britain, Canada, Colombia, Italy and the Pacific Islands)</td>
<td>Experiences of adults with severe visible acne, and implications of these experiences</td>
<td>11 participants with visible acne aged 19–33 years who visited acne message boards Community advertising (discussion groups and message boards)</td>
<td>Visible acne</td>
<td>Interviews via electronic mail Interpretative phenomenological analysis</td>
<td>Powerlessness and the variable nature of acne; comparisons, self-image and identity; the experience of general social interaction; relationships with family and friends; and gender, sexuality and romantic relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magin et al. 18 Australia</td>
<td>Psychological impact of acne</td>
<td>Same participants as reference.</td>
<td>Acne</td>
<td>Semistructured interviews Grounded theory approach</td>
<td>Self-perception and social anxiety; central theme: appearance, depression and anxiety; and consequences of the effects of acne; moderating factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santer et al. 19 UK (Forum users in and outside the UK)</td>
<td>Views and experiences of oral antibiotics for acne and advice shared among messages posted on online forums</td>
<td>Forums including 66 discussions among 294 participants discussing oral antibiotics</td>
<td>Acne</td>
<td>Systematic search for online discussion forums on acne (four forums identified) Thematic analysis</td>
<td>Perception around effectiveness and appropriateness of oral antibiotics for acne; adverse effects with antibiotics; variable advice and experiences in acne severity; and delay in onset of action of oral antibiotics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Continued
Table 1  Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study (country)</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Participants (sampling)</th>
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<th>Data collection, methodology and analysis</th>
<th>Key themes presented by author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Skaggs et al21 USA</td>
<td>Experience using an acne treatment (topical)</td>
<td>27 young adults with acne (15-21) Single centre (either primary or secondary care)</td>
<td>Acne</td>
<td>Video interviews Not labelled</td>
<td>Symptoms; self-perception; social placement; and perception of control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pruthi and Babu20 India</td>
<td>Physical and psychosocial impact of acne in adult females</td>
<td>11 women, adult participants with acne (18-25) Primary and secondary care</td>
<td>Acne</td>
<td>Semi-structured clinical interview and open-ended questions Not labelled</td>
<td>Physical discomfort; anger; and intermingling impact of acne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior and Magin25 UK</td>
<td>Impact of the media on people with acne, psoriasis and atopic eczema</td>
<td>26 patients with acne, 29 with psoriasis and 7 with atopic eczema (13-73 years) Primary care, secondary care and community advertising</td>
<td>Acne, psoriasis and atopic eczema</td>
<td>Semistructured interviews Thematic analysis</td>
<td>Societal ideal; role of media; stigmatisation and other psychological sequelae; appreciation of the falsity of media representations of the ideal; and male respondents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magin et al22 Australia</td>
<td>Impact of the media on people with acne, psoriasis and atopic eczema</td>
<td>30 participants with acne aged 16–79 years Secondary care (invited by letter)</td>
<td>Acne, psoriasis and atopic eczema</td>
<td>Semistructured interviews Thematic analysis</td>
<td>Participants with acne: the role of appearance and sexual attractiveness and gender differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magin et al23 Australia</td>
<td>Impact of acne, psoriasis and atopic eczema on sexual functioning and sexual relationships</td>
<td>Same participants as reference.22</td>
<td>Acne, psoriasis and atopic eczema</td>
<td>Semistructured interviews Analytic induction method and modified grounded theory approach</td>
<td>The universally negative nature of teasing; the use of teasing as an instrument of social exclusion; the use of teasing as a means of establishing or enforcing power relationships; teasing relating to contagion and fear; the emotional and psychological sequelae of teasing; and ‘insensate’ teasing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magin et al24 Australia</td>
<td>Impact of acne, psoriasis and atopic eczema in their experience of teasing and bullying</td>
<td>Same participants as reference.22</td>
<td>Acne, psoriasis and atopic eczema</td>
<td>Semistructured interviews Analytic induction method and modified grounded theory approach</td>
<td>Relationships with GPs; relationships with dermatologists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magin et al26 Australia</td>
<td>Experiences of patients with acne, psoriasis or atopic eczema in their relationships with their doctors</td>
<td>Same participants as reference.22</td>
<td>Acne, psoriasis and atopic eczema</td>
<td>Semistructured interviews Thematic analysis and modified grounded theory approach</td>
<td>Relationships with GPs; relationships with dermatologists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryksina et al28 Large academic health system in the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, area.</td>
<td>Experiences with primary non-adherence to medications for acne and to identify physician-level factors that may improve adherence in this population</td>
<td>Interviews were conducted with 26 patients (19 women, 6 aged &lt;26 years, 15 aged 26–40 years, and 5 aged &gt;40 years)</td>
<td>Acne</td>
<td>Structured interviews Thematic content analysis</td>
<td>Barriers related to cost of medication and insurance coverage; poor understanding of prior authorisation process; physician–patient communication about costs; solutions offered by physicians; backup plan; reservations regarding plan of treatment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Continued
of it’ due to the perception that their acne was caused by puberty or other underlying causes/triggers. Studies showed how people expected treatment to cure their acne as opposed to control it, suggesting that they did not view their condition as requiring long-term management, with implications for initiating and adhering to treatment (table 3).

Identifying potential causes or triggers of acne
A common perception across studies was of viewing acne as a ‘normal’ part of adolescence. However, most participants seemed to have followed a more chronic course with some experiencing acne as an adult, which led to frustration and confusion.12–17 People looked for other possible causes including hygiene and diet with the hope

Figure 2  Model presenting the interrelationships between themes and how they influence treatment initiation and adherence. CAM, complementary and alternative medicine.
of ‘curing’ their acne. Hygiene concerns with regards to acne were related to dirty occupations, pollution, sweat, makeup and inadequate washing.\textsuperscript{13, 18} Dietary considerations around acne included foods such as chocolate, soft drinks, fast foods, coffee, yeast and alcohol.\textsuperscript{13, 15} Genetics and stress were less commonly mentioned by study participants.\textsuperscript{13}

**Expectation that treatment will cure acne not control it**
People expected medical treatments to ‘cure’ their acne, often feeling disappointed when this was not met. Participants described treatment as ‘keeping their acne at bay’, being only partially effective or not working at all.\textsuperscript{14, 19} This appeared to have implications for acne management, with disappointment leading to stopping treatment early or opting for alternative treatments in the absence of ‘instant’ results.

**Impact of acne not recognised**
People across studies experienced substantial impact because of their acne and were frustrated when they felt that this was not recognised by HCPs, friends and family. Physical, psychological and social impact were common

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### Table 2  Analytical and descriptive themes with study reference

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analytical and descriptive themes</th>
<th>Study reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acne is viewed as short-term</td>
<td>12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 11 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 28 27 29 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifying potential causes or triggers of acne</td>
<td>P P P P P P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectation that treatment will cure acne not control it</td>
<td>P P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact of acne not recognised</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived physical impact</td>
<td>P P P P P P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived psychological impact</td>
<td>P P P P P P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived social impact (relationships/avoidance, bullying and work/education)</td>
<td>P P P P P P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived blame</td>
<td>P P P P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived trivialisation by themselves, healthcare professionals and others</td>
<td>P P P P P P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived control over acne treatments and acne</td>
<td>P P P P P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barriers to acne treatments and use of coping strategies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerns about perceived adverse effects and effectiveness of acne treatments</td>
<td>P P P P P P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to use CAM and behavioural strategies</td>
<td>P P P P P P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concealment/compensation</td>
<td>P P P P P P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variable advice and support</td>
<td>P P P P P P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparisons to earlier self and others</td>
<td>P P P P P P</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CAM, complementary and alternative medicine.

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Table 3  Analytical and descriptive themes with representative quotes or authors’ descriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analytical and descriptive themes</th>
<th>Representative quotes or authors’ descriptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acne viewed as a short-term condition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Identifying potential causes or triggers of acne | I didn’t like it, like it made me self-conscious, acne, and I’d rather I didn’t have them. But I did see it as, you know, the thing that most teenagers get. So I was kind of cool with it.13 (male)  
I think diet is important because what you put in your body, it affects how your body works and how your body looks. If you eat dodgy food your skin won’t look healthy13 (male, Leeds acne scale 0.1) |
| Expectation that treatment will cure acne not control it | It was kind of just sort of a keeping it at a certain level as opposed to absolutely like clearing your whole skin and making it sort of a lot better.12 (male)  
I went to the doctor because my skin was upsetting me so much. I’m just praying the antibiotics they’ve given me will fix it.19 |
| Impact of acne not recognised | |
| Perceived physical impact | The fact is that I cannot be normal, when it hurts and is red. It pains and oozes out at times and hurts to smile, and then I cannot feel happy, even if I want to. Also the marks that get left behind, I feel bad about it because it makes my face ugly looking.20 |
| Perceived psychological impact | |
| It was just embarrassing trying to talk to people and you’ve got pimples and people are looking at you and you are trying to hide it as well. It makes you feel embarrassed.14 (female)  
Very embarrassing, not nice to look at, very self-conscious, always think people are looking at you, they probably can’t see it.21 |
| Perceived social impact | ‘Oftentimes, when I have to go to any kind of party or any kind of social event and if I have too much acne, a big pimple, I don’t want to go because I don’t want anyone to look at my face.’15  
‘I would really get upset when I had to go in for a job interview, and I would be afraid that the employer might think that I couldn’t do the job correctly because of my appearance. It is a little bit better, now that I am older and a little bit more secure in myself, but still I find it hard if I look in the mirror and see my face broken out.’15 |
| Perceived blame | ‘I avoid eating sweets but if I eat one piece of chocolate, my family tell me that’s the reason I break out. If I leave my face towel on the couch for 1 second, they tell me that’s the reason I break out.’17 |
| Perceived trivialisation | I had one doctor who did have it when he was young, he had acne scars and that. He was a bit more sympathetic but there were ones that didn’t. To be honest, some of the GPs they just wrote the script out and “Off! On your way.”18 (male)  
‘I had to go to my GP and he could not help me at all. Everything made me feel very frustrated. I felt sometimes just discounted, or like I am not really being listened to at times’.15  
Another man had been refused time off for his ‘trivial’ hospital appointments by his immediate superior and had had to obtain permission from the director, an act that had led to frictions.15 |
| Perceived control over acne treatments and acne | |
| When you get a severe bout of acne like that it does tend to reduce the sense of self control that you have over your body … and if you can gain some of that control back then it makes you feel a little bit more empowered, (…)it helps with the overall self-image.22 (about CAM) (female)  
‘I really can’t control it, it’s just no matter what I do. It’s there, I can’t get rid of it, I can’t slow it down, or make it go away, or anything.’15  
‘With other things, you know that if you put enough effort in, you can achieve what you want, but with acne, no matter how much time you spend putting various treatments on your face, or looking at yourself in the mirror, you cannot make it go away, and that is very frustrating.’15 |
| Barriers to acne treatments and use of coping strategies | |
| Concerns about perceived adverse effects and effectiveness of acne treatments | Antibiotics. I didn’t, at first, really want to take them because I didn’t want to put something in my body that wasn’t natural.23 (female)  
‘I’m still hesitant to use Retin-A again because it is a very harsh topical medication, and I know from what other people have experienced and vaguely what I had experienced…in the distant past there are a lot of harsh reactions…there are other problems that kind of come from it. So it’s solving 1 problem, but then you’re dealing with these other things as well.’23 |
| Desire to use CAM and behavioural strategies | I probably go for the more natural stuff. I probably prefer the tea tree oil face wash cause it’s just a bit more natural. I guess you are not putting too many foreign chemicals in your body… When something’s very chemical you never know what might happen24 (male)  
I always feel better, when I suddenly feel I’ve got to start looking after myself again, I’ve got to treat myself better, [drink] more water, [eat] healthy, the whole lot, [look] after my face, [do] the routine.18 (female) |

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and often led to problems forming new relationships as well as maintaining current ones. Perceptions of blame sometimes related to the myths and misconceptions around acne causation. The perceived trivialisation by HCPs and work colleagues was common across the data and appeared to have implications for acne management including consulting behaviours.

Physical impact was commonly discussed across studies and consisted of physical appearance, itching, quality of sleep, burning, scaring, redness and pain.11 12 15 16 18 20 21

Perceived psychological impact

Study participants described the psychological impact of acne as feeling embarrassed, self-conscious, angry about the perceived cause of their acne, low self-esteem, suicidal, changes in personality and feeling ostracised from society due to the image of 'perfect skin' portrayed by the media.11 12 15–19 21–23

Perceived social impact

The social impact of acne was commonly reported across studies. People engaged in avoidance behaviours, had a negative effect on relationships due to feeling self-conscious about their acne, low self-esteem and a lack of confidence about their appearance.12 14 15 21 22. Bullying and teasing were common across the data and appeared to have implications for acne management including consulting behaviours.

Perceived social impact

Table 3

Analytical and descriptive themes | Representative quotes or authors’ descriptions
---|---
Concealment/compensation | (You compensate for) one physical disability by trying to look different in another way... Go to a martial arts class or go to a serious gym, not an aerobics gym, and you'll have your cleft palate and your stutterers and your acne suffers.18 (male)
| Subsequently, using make-up to cover acne could be a dilemma. Some participants also commented that make-up offered only partial concealment of acne, including of the skin texture such as raised lumps and flaking scabs.19

Variable advice and support | People used to recommend creams to get rid of it – like acne creams and face washes, yeah it's nice positive feedback – you know say 'this might work and try it out' but half the time they never work. But I thought it was quite useful.25 (male)
| My mum is good getting me to doctors and trying all the creams... she just wanted me to be comfortable in my own skin. My mum would probably support me the best.25 (female)
| “With my family, it seems to be the best. They joke about acne, accutane and the side effects. So the humour makes me feel really comfortable about it when I’m with them.”

Comparisons to earlier self and others | “I don’t feel equal to them because they are normal and I am not. Would you rather buy an unblemished apple or an apple with lots of dents and bruises? Nobody likes damaged goods.”
| I don’t think my face is as bad as other people’s. Sometimes when you see people with bad skin you think why am I being so stupid.25 (female)

Analytical and descriptive themes

Concealment/compensation

Variable advice and support

Comparisons to earlier self and others

Open access

Concealment/compensation

Variable advice and support

Comparisons to earlier self and others
people may try alternative treatments for their acne to avoid consulting the HCP.

**Perceived control over acne treatments and acne**

Across studies, there were two aspects of control: people’s perceived control over acne and their control over treatment. Their perceived control over treatment referred to people’s beliefs in their chosen treatment rather than the control being in someone else’s hands (HCP). For example, people in the studies opted for CAM and behavioural strategies, which they felt would alleviate the psychological impact of acne. Three studies reported on people’s perceived control over their acne including feelings of powerlessness when treatments were perceived as ineffective. One study (reporting findings from a commercial trial) found when people perceived increased control over their acne, this improved satisfaction with acne improvement using a topical. Having control over treatment or acne appeared to help alleviate the psychological impact and improve adherence.

**Barriers to acne treatments and use of coping strategies**

Across studies, a key barrier to use of acne treatments was concern and uncertainty regarding their effectiveness, exacerbated by variable advice and support people received from others. Studies highlighted coping strategies discussed by participants, including concealment/compensation (as described below) and making comparisons, which some participants found useful in the short term. Participants in many studies reported a preference for using CAM and behavioural strategies to address their acne. This could be viewed as a barrier to engaging with effective acne treatment or be perceived as a mechanism for coping through seeking control over the condition.

**Concerns about perceived adverse effects and effectiveness of acne treatments**

Concerns around topical treatments for acne included side effects (bleaching, irritation), strength of medication, speed of onset of action, what constituted appropriate application, storage, understanding different topicals and, as mentioned above, uncertainty around their effectiveness. One study found effective use of topicals increased control over acne and reduced the psychological impact, although they did not explore perceptions of treatment ineffectiveness. Two studies highlighted how patients viewed oral isotretinoin as an effective treatment, although they expressed concerns around the treatment’s side effects. Perceived effectiveness of oral antibiotics varied as participants either found them effective, ineffective or partially effective where they worked temporarily. Barriers included delayed onset of action, perceived strength of treatment and adverse effects. One study highlighted barriers such as cost of treatment and understanding processes used by health insurance companies. This study was carried out in USA and therefore, the barriers may not be relevant to the UK population.

**Desire to use CAM and behavioural strategies**

Some studies explored CAM and behavioural strategies for treating acne. CAM treatments included oils, citrus washes, aloe vera, tablets and vitamins. Participants reported a preference for CAM over medical treatments due to ‘natural’ ingredients and fewer adverse effects. Other reasons included sense of internal control and accessibility. Behavioural strategies included dietary manipulation, face washing and sun and sea exposure (less commonly mentioned). The belief that hygiene caused or exacerbated acne led participants to excessively wash or pick their acne to resolve the issue. Dietary manipulation included avoiding foods deemed unhealthy and increasing water intake.

**Receiving variable advice and support about treatments and next steps**

Support from family members was appreciated and included encouragement to consult HCPs, suggestions about which products to try and some felt that humour about the condition or about their treatment (isotretinoin) from friends or family could make them feel less uncomfortable. Participants felt that support from friends with acne were useful as they were able to relate to their situation and recommendations from friends such as products to try were often seen as useful particularly for male participants as some female participants found the advice unsolicited. Advice from online discussion forums was felt to be variable and often consisted of treatment recommendations or suggestions about consulting and navigating health services.

**Concealment/compensation to cope with acne**

Strategies to cope with acne included concealment to take attention away from their acne such as changing clothing and hairstyles. Applying makeup helped some participants cope emotionally, but for others, this emphasised their spots or wore off quickly and some viewed makeup as a cause of acne. People reported compensating for their acne by doing activities including martial arts or losing weight.

**Comparisons to earlier self and others**

Strategies including making comparisons to others or their earlier self were seen as a double-edged sword, whereby participants either felt better about their acne or felt worse, further exacerbating the psychological impact. Participants made comparisons to other health conditions to validate the negative impact of acne or to feel grateful that things were not worse.

**Key differences between GPs and patients’ views and experiences**

One study highlighted GP’s acknowledgement of the psychological impact as well as motivation to escalate severe cases for referrals. Research suggests that people’s own assessment of acne severity differs from clinical assessments that may explain the contrasting views compared with people with acne in other studies, where...
they felt HCPs did not always take acne seriously. The current study also found that GPs were uncertain about topical treatment effectiveness, which they posited may be related to patients’ treatment adherence.

**DISCUSSION**

This systematic review and synthesis of qualitative research highlighted four analytical themes that influence treatment initiation and adherence. People often viewed acne as a short-term condition resulting in implications for self-management, particularly challenges to long-term treatment adherence. The impact of acne was substantial for participants in these studies and they were often frustrated when they perceived others to trivialise their condition. The importance of perceived control was highlighted, including the wish to feel in control of acne and the wish to control treatment. Having control over either one appeared to help alleviate the psychological impact and improve adherence. People had common concerns around treatments that were further influenced by variable advice.

**Strengths and weaknesses**

To our knowledge, this is the first systematic review and synthesis of qualitative papers on acne. It provides a comprehensive overview of people’s views and experiences of acne and its treatments. We are confident that all relevant papers were included as three independent researchers were involved with screening the title and abstracts of papers. However, there is the possibility that we may have missed some studies because of our definition of qualitative and our inclusion/exclusion criteria whereby papers needed to present qualitative data, qualitative methods of data collection and analysis and provide a sufficient amount of information about the qualitative aspect if it was part of a wider study (e.g., questionnaire development paper).

A potential weakness was the limited original research available as many of the included papers (eight) were from the same author. However, although these papers used the same sample, they focused on different research questions and looked at a breadth of peoples’ experiences. We found areas that were underrepresented including HCPs’ experiences treating acne, studies outside of the UK and Australia and men with acne. The review was also restricted by the strengths and weaknesses present in the original papers.

**Comparison with other studies**

The findings are consistent with a review on the impact of eczema, psoriasis and epidermolysis bullosa, which found that people with chronic skin conditions experience negative social interactions.

A review of qualitative studies on adherence to medicines found that people were reluctant to take medicines partly because of concerns over its use including adverse effects and perceived effectiveness. They also highlight how people wish to take control over their own treatment. These findings are consistent with those in this current study, which goes further by suggesting that an increased feeling of control was felt to alleviate the psychological impact and improve adherence.

Studies exploring other skin conditions (vitiligo, psoriasis and eczema) including a paper from this current synthesis have also found that patients feel their HCP trivialises their skin condition. Through synthesising the studies, we have also highlighted the role of self-trivialisation in influencing people’s consulting behaviours.

A quantitative systematic review of treatment adherence in acne found similar barriers around treatment adherence including adverse effects and delayed onset of action resulting in low adherence. Our qualitative synthesis explores this further, suggesting that treatment adherence is influenced by the variable advice received, desire to use CAM and behavioural strategies and perception around the causes of acne, particularly perception that it is a short-term condition.

**CONCLUSION**

This synthesis suggests the need for further research exploring HCPs’ views and experiences with people with acne as certain areas (e.g., perceived trivialisation, treatment choice, acne as a short-term condition and the psychological impact of acne) could be better addressed from both sides. The findings highlight the importance of communicating the long-term management of acne and the importance of control over acne or control over treatment. Further research around providing support for people with acne is needed, with emphasis on the need for mitigating psychological impact. Finally, people need reliable information about acne treatments including how to use them appropriately, time taken until onset of action and how to manage side effects to help them to effectively manage the condition.

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**Contributors** Conception, design and planning of the study were by AI, IM, AWAG, MS and PL as this was part of AI’s PhD. Data curation, formal analysis and writing the original draft were by AI. AI screened all title and abstracts supported by IM and DP who carried out double screening of these articles. Full-text articles were screened by AI and any uncertainties were discussed with the team. 

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**Supplemental material** This content has been supplied by the author(s). It has not been vetted by BMJ Publishing Group Limited (BMJ) and may not have been
REFERENCES

Supplementary material

A: Comprehensive search strategies for each database

MEDLINE

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