

Surprise! 'Acne Cure' Smartphone Apps Don't Work

By [Loren Berlin](#), 10/27/11

"Smartphones make our lives easier in countless ways, but unfortunately when it comes to curing acne, there's no app for that," said [Federal Trade Commission](#) Chairman, Jon Leibowitz, in response to a [settlement reached on Wednesday](#) between the FTC and three men charged with misleading claims that their smartphone apps could get rid of pimples.

One of those charged in the settlement is Dr. Gregory Pearson, a Houston-based dermatologist.

"Dr. Pearson had seen some studies that showed that certain segments of the spectrum of light have medicinal properties, particularly with respect to acne," explains his lawyer, Sesha Kalapatapu. "There are some new treatments out there and he thought it would be fun and interesting to make an app for it. So he teamed up with a software developer, just something on the side for fun."

Except that Dr. Pearson's hobby turned into a little business as 11,600 consumers downloaded AcneApp from the iTunes store, where it sold for \$1.99. And if Dr. Pearson, and his business partner Koby Brown, intended his entertainment to be understood as such by consumers, he probably should have made that clear in the marketing materials. Instead, AcneApp claimed "The app was developed by a dermatologist. A study published by the British Journal of Dermatology showed blue and red light treatments eliminated p-acne bacteria (a major cause of acne) and reduces skin blemishes by 76%."

Based on this science, consumers were advised to hold their phone screen up to their pimples, activate the app, and sit still for a few minutes while the app's red and blue lights beamed out from the phone. Repeat daily, as needed.

Surprisingly, the science isn't entirely flawed. "Some forms of light therapy do help with acne," says Dr. Gary Goldenberg, assistant professor of dermatology and pathology at the prestigious [Mount Sinai School of Medicine](#). "But the app does not. The app does not use a correct light source and doesn't have enough strength to help."

The FTC came to the same conclusion, arguing that not only does the British Journal of Dermatology article not support AcneApp's claim that it can improve spotty skin, there is no other science to back the app either. So the [agency charged](#) Pearson and Brown with "baseless claims." In a [settlement announced Wednesday](#), the two men agreed to stop making acne-related claims about their mobile apps "without competent and reliable scientific evidence" to support it. They are also barred from "misrepresenting research, tests, or studies," and will pay \$14,294.

Pearson and Brown are not the only two men involved in the settlement. Andrew Finkle, owner of "Acne Pwner," a similar light-based smartphone app whose marketing materials said "Kill ACNE with this simple, yet powerful tool," and whose AcnePwner app was downloaded 3,300 times in the Android Marketplace at 99¢ a pop, has similar restrictions on his future business endeavors. He will pay \$1,700. While the financial penalties sound small, the settlement represents a new chapter for the FTC, as this is the first time the agency has brought charges against fraudulent health claims in the app world.

As for Dr. Pearson, it represents his last foray into the app market. "He's learned his lesson," says Kalapatapu. "It's an expensive lesson. But I think he's going to stick to his day job from now on."

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