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RESEARCH LETTER

Reply to “Diagnosis of stress-associated dermatological conditions in New York City safety net hospitals during the pandemic”

To the Editor: We appreciate the opportunity to respond to the letter by Tefft et al regarding our previously published report, “Cross-sectional survey examining skin picking and hair pulling disorders during the COVID-19 pandemic.”¹

Tefft et al highlight how life changes accompanying the COVID-19 pandemic have potentiated stress-associated dermatologic conditions for many. Our study, conducted during July 2020, found patients with body-focused repetitive behaviors (BFRBs) experienced worsened symptom severity because of COVID-19–related life stressors. Although the authors did not specifically examine the incidence of BFRBs in their study, the significant increase in diagnosis of certain stress-related dermatologic disorders during the pandemic underscores the possibility that some patients are continuing to experience worse BFRB symptoms because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite the increased incidence of certain dermatologic conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic, effective treatment remains challenging for many stress-related disorders. Treatment options for BFRBs including comprehensive behavioral therapy, medications, and wearable technologies are not accessible to all because of cost and inequitable health care delivery. Patients using safety net health systems, such as those in the authors’ study, may be at particular risk of BFRB underdiagnosis or inadequate treatment because of insurance status and lack of access to medical specialists. However, future studies are needed to investigate this further.

Dermatologists have expanded patient care access with use of telemedicine.² Although further studies are needed, we are encouraged by telemedicine’s potential to improve access for patients with BFRBs and other neurocutaneous disorders. We find this particularly important as subsequent literature examining the influence of COVID-19 stressors on trichotillomania severity have predominantly been described in the pediatric population, for which there are relatively few dermatologic specialists.^{3–5} Additionally, the increase in telogen effluvium reported by the authors also underscores the importance of obtaining a complete hair history and thorough scalp examination to exclude trichotillomania.

We applaud the authors for examining the incidence of stress-related dermatologic disease within a safety net health system during the pandemic. We agree with the authors that dermatologists should be aware that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused an increase in certain stress-related dermatologic conditions, and we believe that continued screening for BFRBs may be warranted in patients with a consistent medical history or clinical picture.

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Funding sources: None.

IRB approval status: Not applicable.

Reprints not available from the authors.

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Conflicts of interest

None disclosed.

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