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TATTOOS AND PIGMENTS IN THE US: COMPLICATIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND ADVOCACY

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This presentation will focus on current areas of research and development on tattoos and other pigmented body art in the United States. The estimates of tattoo prevalence are as low as 10-13% in youth or as high as 50% in military personnel. The scope of the research centers on dermatologic issues, psychosocial implications of body art, and advocacy issues.

Dermatologic complications associated with tattoos are one focus of research in the US. In 2013, English et al. published a review of inflammatory, infectious, and neoplastic reactions to tattoos. They emphasize that clinicians should consider systemic reactions and complications such as sarcoidosis, lupus, psoriasis, urticaria and vasculitis. In our review we recommend obtaining a bacterial culture while considering empiric antibiotics for tattoo infections. In particular pseudomonas cellulitis and mycobacterial infections are reported throughout the literature. Henna tattoos pose a risk for allergic sensitivity due to para-Phenylene-diamine and can result in prolonged hyper or hypopigmentation. Kent et al published a review of laser tattoo removal emphasizing careful pre selection criteria, management of expectations of laser removal, and monitoring for complications. Pulse laser treatment of tattoos can pose a risk for development of melanoma and other neoplasms as discussed in many case reports.

Medical providers should understand the psychosocial implications of body art. Most youth pursue tattoos to express individuality; however some use it as a marker of physical or psychological trauma. According to recent studies, 50% of youth (15-25) pursuing body art are altered with substances including alcohol, marijuana, amphetamines, and narcotics. Two notable exceptions to this are prisoners and members of military. Carroll et al concluded that teenagers with one or more tattoos are at higher risk for gateway drug use, hard drug use, sexual behavior risk, and suicide behavior risk.

Researchers are focusing on advocacy and legal issues surrounding patient safety and tattoo practices and standards. Each state has rules on consent for tattoos and piercings by minors ranging from written parental consent, to presence of a parent with accompanying proof of guardianship documentation. Illegal tattooing persists due to lack of enforcement and pervasiveness of unregistered tattoo and piercing parlors. Our colleagues are working on an AAP position statement for unauthorized tattoos and piercings in adolescents for 2014. The Alliance of Professional Tattooists promotes safety, apprenticeship, and other regulations in an effort to improve quality and awareness through their website www.safe-tattoos.com