Medical alert tattoos in minors should not be advocated

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Dear Editor,

We read with interest the “image case” reported by Chadwick and Shah describing a diabetic medical alert tattoo (MAT) in a 15-year-old boy [1]. Tattooing for the purpose of medical identification during emergency situations (e.g., hypoglycemia in diabetes) has recently emerged, but is underreported [2, 3, 5]. Beyond their potential life-saving benefit [4], MATs may enhance a positive effect towards a coping strategy and active mastery of chronic diseases [3].

Besides, in our experience with tattooing in adults with diabetes, the process of acquiring a MAT is a strictly personal decision, that takes variable durations to pursue (several years, except for patients already tattooed), and is usually related to the fear of hypoglycemia and the burden of the medical alert jewelry (cost, breakability, and loss). However, MATs in patients with diabetes should be carefully planned and performed, to avoid wound infection and poor healing, in addition to the general hygienic precautions recommended

for tattooing in general [2]. Therefore, we echo the authors’ recommendations [1] to ensure optimal glycemic control prior to tattooing and to avoid areas of possible peripheral neuropathy or poor circulation (e.g., legs and feet).

Other issues related to MATs include legal and ethical dilemmas of the so-called do not resuscitate (DNR) tattoos [2]. This issue has perplexed the emerging discussion about MATs and has created a state of anxiety: Whether these DNR tattoos are legally binding or should be honored by emergency personnel or clinicians in hospitals when a patient with such tattoo needs resuscitation?

We agree with the authors that a dialogue involving clinicians, emergency personnel, and health organizations is prudent to define a standardized MAT: A simple, easily readable design and a location that are rapidly accessible and easily recognizable during emergency situations. While this may remain debatable, we do not advocate MATs for minors.

Conflict of interest None

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