Skin Diseases – More than Skin Deep

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Although the skin is our body’s largest organ, skin diseases rarely receive a proportional degree of attention from the general public, and sometimes even by doctors. Skin diseases are often dismissed as superficial afflictions or something that will go away on its own in time. However, skin diseases are far from being just skin-deep and can have widespread and sometimes devastating impact on one’s well-being.

While it is true that skin diseases are rarely life threatening, they can nevertheless have a pronounced impact on one’s psychological and social well-being. Simply think back to your teenage years when acne on your face can make you extremely self-conscious or even shy away from having social contacts. The link between skin diseases and mental health has been well established: Studies have shown that psychiatric disorders including depression, social phobia and anxiety disorders can develop secondary to acne vulgaris1-3. Acne patients also report greater levels of anxiety and depression than patients with serious medical illnesses, such as cancer. By providing acne patients with effective treatment, not only are they physically treated, patients also report significant improvements in self-esteem, affection, obsessive-compulsiveness, shame, embarrassment, body image, social assertiveness and self-confidence4.

Another reason why dermatological problems deserve more attention than they currently receive is their prevalence - Skin diseases are frequent encounters by family physicians and general practitioners5-9. According to a study published in the 2008 Annuals of Family Physician, skin diseases account for more than one eighth of all diseases seen by family physicians in the Netherlands10. Another study which analysed statistics from 2002-2005 in the US, found skin conditions to account for 8% of all visits to family physicians and the common skin disorders they diagnosed were dermatitis, pyoderma, acne and warts11.

In view of the deep psychological impact skin diseases can have and their widespread prevalence in the general population, I trust that the present issue of the Hong Kong Medical Diary will be of great interest to you all. In this issue, we are privileged to have received inputs on the treatment of some of the most commonly encountered skin diseases from a number of very experienced and well-respected dermatologists in town, to whom I would like to express my utmost gratitude: Dr. KK Lo, a highly-skilled dermatologist and the former consultant-in-charge of the Social Hygiene Service shares his experience in managing nail disorders; Dr. KM Ho, the consultant-in-charge at the Social Hygiene Service and Dr. TS Cheng, an experienced dermatologist provide us with a review of superficial fungal infections. I also provide a review of the medical treatments...
for acne in this issue. In addition to the aforementioned medical dermatological diseases, we are also privileged to have Dr. Henry Chan, a renowned dermatologist with keen research interests in the field, gives us an update in the recent advancements in cosmetic dermatology. I would also like to thank Dr. Simon Ku, a very artistic dermatologist, for providing the cover shot of this issue and Dr. CK Kwan, a keen hiker for sharing some of his favourite hiking pathways in Hong Kong.

I hope these articles will convince you that dermatological issues are indeed more than just skin-deep and encourage everyone to give skin diseases their due attention and care. May I also take this opportunity to wish you all a joyful Christmas and all the best in 2011.

References