VITILIGO: A MORE VISIBLE PROBLEM IN OUR COMMUNITY

One to two percent of people worldwide are affected by vitiligo, from all ethnic groups. The skin is unable to produce pigment and becomes white. In individuals who are genetically predisposed to developing vitiligo, injury to the skin or emotional and physical stress may aggravate the condition.

The Vitiligo Association of Australia (VAA) was founded in September 2010 for patient support, public education and the promotion of research into vitiligo within Australia. President of the Vitiligo Association of Australia, Dr Adrian Mar is also a co-founder of the Vitiligo Clinic at The Skin and Cancer Foundation in Melbourne, and a Fellow of the Australasian College of Dermatologists (ACD).

Dr Adrian Mar, dermatologist with the ACD says: “Vitiligo is particularly disfiguring in those with darker skin. With the change in the migrant population in Australia from those originally from the United Kingdom and Europe, to those from Asia, India and Africa, we are now seeing a larger number of people in the community seeking help with this condition. Within certain cultural groups there remains a deep stigma towards those affected by vitiligo.”

Vitiligo affects all races, genders and ages with many cases beginning in childhood. The cause of vitiligo is unknown. It is most likely an autoimmune condition where the body’s immune system attacks its own tissues. It is neither infectious, nor related to dietary or environmental factors. Tanya Tyler, runs a support group in Sydney for patients with vitiligo. They meet every two to three months.

Tanya Tyler says: “Although vitiligo is usually not harmful medically, its emotional and psychological effects can be huge. People with vitiligo can experience emotional stress, particularly if the condition develops on visible areas of the body. They can feel embarrassed, ashamed, depressed or worried about how others will react, especially if they are adolescents. It’s very therapeutic for vitiligo patients to meet and get support from each other.”

Dr Monisha Gupta, Fellow of the ACD, helps run a dedicated Pigmentary Disorders and Vitiligo Clinic at The Skin Hospital in Darlinghurst, Sydney. In addition to medical consultation, photo documentation and photo therapy for vitiligo, they also offer a nurse led camouflage clinic and are the only centre in New South Wales to offer Excimer lamp therapy.

Dr Monisha Gupta, dermatologist with the ACD says: “The dermatologist-run vitiligo clinics in Sydney and Melbourne provide specialised care that is not available elsewhere, including skin camouflage services and surgical options that are suitable to treat some cases of vitiligo. There is a great need to increase awareness of vitiligo and to raise funds for more research and services, and we and the Vitiligo Association of Australia are actively engaged in this endeavour.”

Dr Mar says: “Treatment to bring back the colour in vitiligo is more successful if commenced within the first few months of onset, so it is vital for patients and General Practitioners (GPs) to recognise vitiligo and commence treatment promptly, which may include referral to a dermatologist. However those with long-standing vitiligo should not lose hope as some forms of treatment are now available to help those with vitiligo that has not improved with standard therapy.”
Links to further information

Vitiligo Association of Australia

Skin & Cancer Foundation Inc Vitiligo Clinic

The Skin Hospital- Pigmentary Disorders and Vitiligo Clinic

A-Z of Skin

Find a local dermatologist

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About the Australasian College of Dermatologists (ACD):

The ACD is the peak medical college accredited by the Australian Medical Council for the training and professional development of medical practitioners in the specialty of dermatology. They provide authoritative information about dermatology to Government, the media, other health professionals and the general public.

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