Child Abuse Imaging and Findings in the Time of COVID-19

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OBJECTIVE: To assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on physical abuse in young children, we compared the following before and during the pandemic: (1) skeletal survey volume, (2) percent of skeletal surveys revealing clinically unsuspected (occult) fractures, and (3) clinical severity of presentation. We hypothesized that during the pandemic, children with minor abusive injuries would be less likely to present for care, but severely injured children would present at a comparable rate to prepandemic times. We expected that during the pandemic, the volume of skeletal surveys would decrease but the percentage revealing occult fractures would increase and that injury severity would increase. METHODS: We conducted a retrospective study of children younger than 2 years undergoing skeletal surveys because of concern for physical abuse at a tertiary children's hospital. Subjects were identified by querying a radiology database during the March 15, 2019-October 15, 2019 (pre-COVID-19) period and the March 15, 2020-October 15, 2020 (COVID-19) period, followed by chart review to refine our population and abstract clinical and imaging data. RESULTS: Pre-COVID-19, 160 skeletal surveys were performed meeting the inclusion criteria, compared with 125 during COVID-19, representing a 22% decrease. No change was observed in identification of occult fractures (6.9% pre-COVID vs 6.4% COVID, P = 0.87). Clinical severity of presentation did not change, and child protective services involvement/referral decreased during COVID. CONCLUSIONS: Despite a >20% decrease in skeletal survey performance early in the pandemic, the percent of skeletal surveys revealing occult fractures did not increase. Our results suggest that decreases in medical evaluations for abuse did not stem from decreased presentation of less severely injured children.

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