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MEDIA RELEASE

ALOPECIA IN TEEN BOYS MAY PUT THEM AT SUICIDE RISK

YOUNG men and boys diagnosed with rapid hair loss due to alopecia areata may be an at-risk group for self-harm, psychological distress and suicide, according to a letter in the *Medical Journal of Australia*.

Professor Rodney Sinclair, director of dermatology at Epworth Hospital in Melbourne, noted that in 2011 four teenage boys had committed suicide following diagnosis of alopecia areata.

Alopecia areata is the most common autoimmune disease in humans. It causes circular patches of hair loss or total hair loss, which can be especially disfiguring in males, who generally have short hair. The disease is characterised by chronic, sudden and unpredictable relapses, the triggers for which are unknown.

The Australia Alopecia Areata Foundation's online registry recorded 196 new registrations between 2010 and 2012. Twenty-two were males aged under 18, including the four who died by suicide, and three others aged 15, 16 and 17 who were considered to be at risk of suicide by their psychiatrists.

"All four boys had been recently diagnosed", Professor Sinclair wrote. "There were no preceding psychological disorders and all were said to be popular among their peers and capable students.

"Social withdrawal and school avoidance began after the alopecia."

Suicide deaths of boys under the age of 15 are rare — in Victoria there were 12 between 2007 and 2011. The age-specific rate is 0.4 per 100 000 population.

"Physicians should be aware that young men and boys with rapid-onset alopecia areata represent a particular at-risk group for self-harm and psychological distress", Professor Sinclair wrote.

Common issues identified include poor self-image, grief and loss, and sleeping disorders.

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