



# Movement Disorders and SARS-CoV-2

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## Introduction

As we have entered the third year of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, it has become increasingly difficult to summarize all aspects of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) and movement disorders. However, although the early literature on this topic was disparate and disorganized, more systematic compilation and review of these data in recent months has given a better sense of the impact of COVID-19 in movement disorders patients.<sup>1,2</sup> We review the association of SARS-CoV-2 with movement disorders and highlight some gaps and controversies within these broad topics. We, first, discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on movement disorders patients. We, then, discuss the emergence of movement disorders in the setting of SARS-CoV-2 infection. Finally, we discuss the notable surge in functional movement disorders, both in the setting of SARS-CoV-2 infection and following COVID-19 vaccination.

## The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Movement Disorders: Controlling for Confounders

Although there is some sparse data on the impact of COVID-19 on patients with dystonia<sup>3</sup> and tic disorders,<sup>4,5</sup> the overwhelming majority of impact studies have been undertaken in Parkinson's disease (PD) cohorts. The heterogeneity of PD patients with respect to age, disease severity, and comorbidities means that prevalence and outcome data in PD patients who contract COVID-19 have been conflicting. The reported prevalence of COVID-19 in PD has ranged from 0.57% (equivalent to a non-PD control group)<sup>6</sup> to 25.6% (more than double that of a non-PD control group).<sup>6,7</sup> This discrepancy can be explained by the

fact that the lower reported prevalence was from an Italian phone survey study, whereas the higher reported prevalence calculated the seroprevalence of SARS-CoV-2 among asymptomatic PD patients during the third wave of COVID-19 in Iran. These vastly differing figures highlight the importance of considering the study methodology and population from which those data are reported. Three recent meta-analyses have estimated that the prevalence rate is 2% to 5%.<sup>8–10</sup> In these meta-analyses, however, obesity, pulmonary disease, diabetes mellitus, and immune-compromise were all associated with contracting COVID-19 in PD patients. This suggests that canonical COVID-19 risk factors could drive an observed increased prevalence in PD. Another systematic review demonstrated that prevalence varied according to geography (2.6% in Spain, 0.9% in the United States, and variable values in different regions of Italy, ranging from 7.1%–8.5% in Lombardy, 0.9% in Tuscany, and 0.6% in Piedmont and in the Bologna district).<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, reported mortality among PD patients who contract COVID-19 has been of great concern. However, studies to date have recorded a range of case fatalities from 5.2% to 100%.<sup>12,13</sup> Once again, systematic reviews and meta-analyses have helped to clarify risk, with mortality estimates among PD patients ranging from 12% to 25.1%.<sup>6,9,10</sup> One study found no significant differences between COVID-19 patients with PD and without PD (OR = 1.42; 95% CI = 0.26; 7.70;  $P = 0.687$ ).<sup>9</sup> In many other studies, advanced age, severe or advanced disease, and comorbidities all played a significant role in mortality, suggesting that age and frailty may be the drivers of mortality in PD patients.<sup>14–17</sup> Again, the study methodology and the heterogeneity of PD suggest that pooled mortality rates do not capture the nuances of which PD patients are at risk from SARS-CoV-2 and why. Importantly, however, in those PD patients who recover from COVID-19, there appears to be a very high proportion (up to 85%) who experience long-term negative sequelae within the spectrum of the so-called “long COVID”, including worsening of motor function (51%), increased levodopa requirements

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**Keywords:** SARS-CoV-2, COVID-19, parkinsonism, myoclonus, functional, psychogenic.

Received 23 April 2022; accepted 2 May 2022.

Published online 7 December 2022 in Wiley Online Library ([wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)). DOI: 10.1002/mdc3.13615

(48.2%), fatigue (40.7%), brain-fog and other cognitive issues (22.2%), and sleep disturbance (22.2%).<sup>18</sup>

When considering the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on PD, one cannot ignore the detrimental effect of lockdowns/isolation on PD patients. This pandemic has highlighted the importance of physical exercise and social interaction on the well-being of PD patients. Motor and non-motor symptoms of PD worsen during lockdowns,<sup>19</sup> dyskinesia can worsen,<sup>20</sup> anxiety heightens,<sup>21</sup> impulsive-compulsive behaviors become more common,<sup>22</sup> sleep problems become more common,<sup>23</sup> and access to medications, physiotherapy, and exercise become more problematic.<sup>24,25</sup> Hence, the secondary effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on PD is more complex than the impact of SARS-CoV-2 infection alone.

Importantly, the current outcome data is almost entirely drawn from the pre-vaccination cohorts. Hence, proper re-evaluation of COVID-19 risk in vaccinated PD patients is urgently needed. Only one early population study from the United Kingdom indicates that PD may still increase the risk of poor outcome among vaccinated patients, but further studies are needed to understand the true risk.<sup>26</sup> In many ways, the difficulties we have had with assimilating data on PD in COVID-19 is not unique and implies a much broader difficulty with epidemiological studies of PD in general. Specifically, the heterogeneity and complexity of PD makes it difficult to perform rigorous studies without very large cohorts and careful consideration of confounders.

In summary, the COVID-19 pandemic is already demonstrating a significant negative effect on people with PD. Extracting how much of the direct impact is related to age, frailty, and comorbidities and what proportion of this effect is indirect (related to lockdown and isolation) has not been possible to date. The long-term effects of PD patients who have navigated this pandemic remains to be seen, but it is clearly going to have been detrimental.

## The Emergence of Movement Disorders Following SARS-CoV-2 Infection: Causal or Coincidental?

There is a broad range of neurological manifestations of COVID-19. However, the new onset of a movement disorder in the setting of SARS-CoV-2 infection is rare with prevalence estimates across admitted COVID-19 patients of 0.2% to 1%.<sup>27–29</sup> The most common movement disorder seen is myoclonus (63.4% of movement disorder cases), ataxia (38.7%), oculomotor abnormalities (20.4%), action/postural tremor (10.8%), akinetic-rigid syndrome (5.38%), and more rarely catatonia, dystonia, and chorea (all in the range of 1%–3%).<sup>30</sup> Functional movement disorders (FMD) have been rarely reported so far

although the experience of our “COVID-19 clinic” seems to indicate a much higher prevalence, especially among vaccinated subjects.<sup>31</sup>

### Myoclonus

COVID-19-associated myoclonus can be multifocal or generalized, positive or (more rarely) negative, proximal more than distal and can involve the face, tongue, larynx, trunk, and diaphragm. It is spontaneous or action-induced or can be stimulus-sensitive to touch and sound (usually when proximal). The onset is usually within 1 month of COVID-19 symptoms.<sup>32</sup> Most studies suggest a subcortical origin probably originating in the brainstem<sup>33,34</sup> although cortical spikes have rarely been demonstrated.<sup>35,36</sup>

### Ataxia

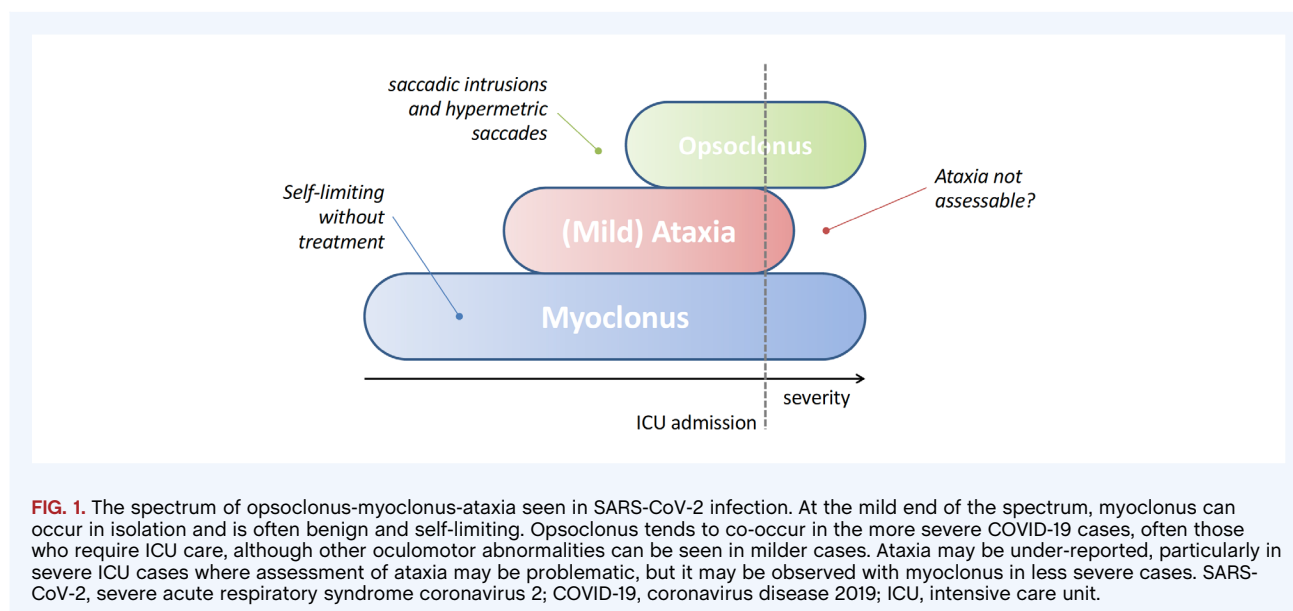
Although myoclonus has often been reported in isolation, it can frequently be accompanied by other signs. Ataxia, when present with myoclonus is usually mild and axial predominant.<sup>37</sup> Ataxia can however occur in isolation, either secondary to cerebellitis in children, which can be acute and severe (requiring surgical intervention)<sup>38,39</sup> or as a post-infectious process in adults where it runs a more benign immunoresponsive course.<sup>40</sup> Of course, ataxia can also occur for other reasons in COVID-19 including Miller Fisher syndrome,<sup>41</sup> Guillain-Barré syndrome,<sup>42</sup> myelitis,<sup>43</sup> anti-glutamic acid decarboxylase (GAD)-associated ataxia,<sup>44</sup> and mild encephalopathy with reversible splenic lesions (MERS).<sup>45</sup>

### Oculomotor Disorders

Opsoclonus or ocular flutter has been reported in many patients with myoclonus and ataxia and these tend to occur in more severe cases suggesting that all of these cases form part of the opsoclonus-myoclonus-ataxia spectrum (Fig. 1).<sup>33,46–51</sup> These cases tend to have a benign prognosis, responding well to immunotherapy or resolving spontaneously.<sup>52</sup> Other oculomotor abnormalities including internuclear ophthalmoplegia, cranial nerve palsies, oscillopsia, ocular bobbing, and vertical supranuclear gaze palsy have all been described in the setting of SARS-CoV-2 infection.<sup>53</sup>

### Tremor

Tremor has been reported in 13.8% of a series 165 COVID-19 patients at 6 months post-infection.<sup>54</sup> It tends to be a mild postural and action tremor and may be transient.<sup>55</sup> The etiology can include enhancement of physiological tremor (eg, because of medications or systemic conditions), cerebellar involvement, and fine distal jerks in the setting of neuropathy and functional tremor.<sup>56</sup>



## Chorea

Chorea is not uncommon in children, representing 3.9% of neurological complications of pediatric COVID-19 admissions in one study (0.15% of total cohort).<sup>57</sup> Two cases of Sydenham's chorea have been reported (one new-onset case and one relapse) in keeping with a possible autoimmune mechanism.<sup>58,59</sup> Chorea has been reported in adults (with striatal magnetic resonance imaging [MRI] abnormalities in some) although diabetes mellitus co-existed in at least two patients (presumed triggered by COVID-19 in one case).<sup>60,61</sup> Hence, chorea could also be an epiphenomenon of metabolic derangements in these patients.<sup>2</sup>

## Parkinsonism

Since the beginning of the pandemic, particular interest has surrounded whether SARS-CoV-2 can cause parkinsonism. The theory that we might expect a significant increase in incidence of post-infectious parkinsonism as a result of SARS-CoV-2 was fueled by a number of factors.<sup>62</sup> The well-documented (but potentially unfounded) comparisons between post-encephalitic parkinsonism in the wake of the "Spanish" flu of 1914 to 1918,<sup>63</sup> the occurrence of anosmia in COVID-19 patients, and shared common pathophysiological mechanisms between dopamine synthesis and SARS-CoV-2<sup>64</sup> prompted many authors to suggest that a Parkinson's pandemic will follow. This concept was debated vigorously in the literature at the earliest stages of the pandemic.<sup>65,66</sup> As time progresses and numbers of infected individuals increase, it becomes increasingly apparent that true post-infectious parkinsonism is rare in COVID-19. We review the reported cases of parkinsonism in COVID-19 in Table 1. It is likely that a significant number of these represent unmasking of pre-existing subclinical PD. Acute emergence of parkinsonism during

stress may reflect pre-existing nigrostriatal damage, concealed in a pre-clinical phase via compensatory mechanisms. This nicely mirrors what was seen in behaviorally-normal rats with large dopamine-depleting brain lesions that became akinetic only when exposed to acute external stressors.<sup>67</sup> Based on the incidence of PD and documented global burden of SARS-CoV-2 infection, one would expect tens of thousands of newly diagnosed cases of PD among those infected over the age of 40. One of the more convincing post-infectious cases was of a previously healthy 58-year-old man who developed asymmetric tremor, rigidity, and bradykinesia following COVID-19.<sup>68</sup> He also demonstrated a fluctuating encephalopathy, distal myoclonus, episodic opsoclonus, and limited vertical gaze (with "round the houses" phenomenon). Dopamine transporter (DAT) SPECT imaging confirmed bilateral asymmetric decrease in presynaptic dopamine uptake involving both putamina. It appears that the atypical neurological features have now all resolved with the exception of typical asymmetric levodopa-responsive parkinsonism, suggesting that he may indeed have had underlying PD with a superimposed parainfectious opsoclonus-myoclonus-ataxia syndrome (personal correspondence with Méndez-Guerrero et al., 2020). Other mechanisms, such as silent hypoxemia, cytokine-related neuroinflammation, microglial activation, endothelial dysfunction, and megakaryocyte-mediated hemodynamic changes could contribute, as suggested by a case of severe parkinsonism following a prolonged ICU admission complicated by renal failure, refractory hypotension, and disseminated intravascular coagulation.<sup>69</sup> MRI brain demonstrated edema in the globus pallidus bilaterally and deep cerebellar nuclei containing small hemorrhagic foci with later atrophy of the globus pallidus and tissue loss in the dentate nuclei. A similar case with pallidal lesions but with levodopa-responsiveness has also been reported and silent hypoxia was the assumed culprit.<sup>70</sup>

**TABLE 1** Reported cases of parkinsonism in setting of SARS-CoV-2 infection including clinical and paraclinical features and likely etiology

Reference	Age/sex	COVID-19 severity	COVID-19 to onset (days)	Atypical features	DA denervation	Brain MRI	Prodromal symptoms	Likely etiology
Cohen et al. 2020 <sup>71</sup>	45/M	Admission	14–21		+ (typical)	Normal	No	Unmasking IPD
Faber et al. 2020 <sup>72</sup>	35/	Mild	10	Slow saccades and gait impairment	+ (unilateral)		No	Unmasking IPD
Mendéz-Guerrero et al. 2020 <sup>68</sup>	58/M	ICU	32	Decreased LOC, myoclonic jerks, opsoclonus, vertical gaze palsy	+ (typical)	Normal	No	Immune-mediated ± unmasking IPD
Akili and Yosunkaya, 2021 <sup>73</sup>	72/M	ICU	5	Encephalopathic, symmetric, reversible after convalescent plasma treatment and plasma exchange.	NA	Normal	No	Encephalitic? Akinetic-mutism
Makhouli and Jankovic 2021 <sup>74</sup>	64/F	Mild	5		+ (unilateral)	Likely normal	Constipation	Unmasking IPD
Cavallieri et al., 2022 <sup>75</sup>	67/M	Admission	120		+	Normal	No, GBA variant	Unmasking IPD
Cavallieri et al., 2022 <sup>75</sup>	45/M	Mild	120		+	Normal	No, PRKN heter. variant	Unmasking IPD
Featou et al., 2021 <sup>69</sup>	46/M	ICU	91	Early axial involvement (hypophonia, freezing, instability), levodopa resistant, yawning, frontal lobe release signs	NA	Abnormal—pallidal and dentate lesions	No	Vascular/hypoxicemic
Morassi et al., 2021 <sup>76</sup>	70/F	Admission	77	Use of haloperidol, myoclonus, decreased LOC, seizure, ophthalmoparesis, limb fixed dystonia, rapid dementia	+	Progressive atrophy	Anxiety, depression	Encephalitic? Akinetic-mutism
Morassi et al., 2021 <sup>76</sup>	73/F	Admission	0?	Treated with olanzapine and amisulpride, anarthria, vertical gaze palsy, decreased LOC, fatal outcome	NA	Traumatic hematoma	Anxiety, depression	Encephalitic? Akinetic-mutism

(Continues)

TABLE 1 Continued

Reference	Age/sex	COVID-19 severity	COVID-19 to onset (days)	Atypical features	DA denervation	Brain MRI	Prodromal symptoms	Likely etiology
Ayele et al., 2021 <sup>70</sup>	35/F	ICU	?	Jaw-closing dystonia, drooling	NA	Abnormal – pallidal lesions	No	Vascular/hypoxicemic
Ong et al., 2022 <sup>77</sup>	31/M	Admission	6	Myorhythmia	NA	Abnormal – thalamic lesions	No	Encephalitic? Akinetic-mutism
Rao et al., 2022 <sup>78</sup>	72/M	Admission	5	Early axial involvement (freezing, instability)	NA		No	Possible IPD, symptoms resolved with levodopa
Rao et al., 2022 <sup>78</sup>	66/M	ICU	7	Immobile and mute	NA	Generalized atrophy, periventricular WM changes	No	Encephalitic? Akinetic-mutism
Rao et al., 2022 <sup>78</sup>	74/M	Mild	56	Early axial involvement (instability)	NA	Periventricular WM changes	No	Unmasking IPD

Despite some animal models, which suggest that SARS-CoV-2 infection can lead to Lewy body formation in the absence of detectable viral RNA,<sup>79</sup> there is a paucity of evidence in human studies that COVID-19 can directly cause PD. Even in longer term follow up at 6 months, parkinsonism was present in only 0.46% of patients who had encephalopathy at time of infection.<sup>80</sup> Some of these cases may be an akinetic-mutism (that is well described in COVID-19 encephalitis) rather than true parkinsonism.<sup>54,81</sup> However, the potential for late increases in neurodegeneration among infected cohorts remains to be seen.

## A Critical Review of Atypical Reports

A number of atypical cases have been reported that warrant mention. Two cases of diaphragmatic myoclonus/flutter, the etiology of which has been debated, have been reported.<sup>82</sup> Second, convergence spasm has been seen in a number of cases associated with either ocular flutter or opsoclonus.<sup>33,83</sup> Given that convergence spasm is most often of functional origin and that some of these cases have atypical findings, one must have a high degree of suspicion and critical appraisal of patients with these new onset movement disorders. As outlined in the next section, FMD following COVID-19 are not uncommon.

Given its time course and response to immunotherapy, almost all authors reporting cases of opsoclonus-myoclonus-ataxia syndrome postulate a parainfectious immune-mediated phenomenon. However, serum and cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) testing is usually normal.<sup>33,84</sup> Autoantibodies directed against Purkinje cells, striatal neurons, and hippocampal neurons have been reported.<sup>85</sup> Other antibodies reported in the setting of COVID-19 infection include LGI-1,<sup>47</sup> NMDAR,<sup>86</sup> CASPR-2,<sup>87</sup> MOG,<sup>88</sup> and GAD65.<sup>44</sup> We must consider the possibility that these antibodies are an epiphenomenon rather than directly causative, particularly when the clinical picture does not fit with the well-elucidated spectrum of those autoantibodies. Nevertheless, there is strong evidence to support an immune-mediated hypothesis, including the response to immunotherapy, self-reactive immune responses demonstrated in the central nervous system (CNS) of COVID-19 patients with neurological symptoms, and recently described candidate auto-epitopes (THAP3 and IFT88).<sup>89</sup> Other hypotheses for SARS-CoV-2-associated myoclonus include hypoxic injury,<sup>90</sup> direct viral CNS invasion,<sup>91</sup> cytokine-mediated inflammation,<sup>34</sup> adverse drug effects, or metabolic abnormalities<sup>92</sup> although it seems that these hypotheses lack convincing evidence or are rarer occurrences.

Hence, some movement disorders occurring acutely in the setting of COVID-19 are highly likely to be parainfectious, others may merely be unmasking of a pre-existing subclinical condition, and others (as we will discuss in the next section) are highly likely to be functional in origin.

# Functional Movement Disorders and the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Potentially Greater and Underrecognized Problem

Reports of FMD in COVID-19 patients are increasingly common, although still likely to be under-reported.<sup>31</sup> With repeated restrictive measures in place across the world, changes in occupational status and reductions in social interactions, it is no surprise that there has been a significant amount of psychological distress experienced by many. One study reported a 2.3-fold increase in psychological distress in the first wave of the pandemic, with female sex and young age identified as risk factors.<sup>93</sup> There were initial concerns of deterioration in symptom control in FMD patients because of their increased susceptibility to stressful conditions, especially during the pandemic. However, several of these early studies found that the majority of patients did not report a clear change.<sup>94–97</sup> This included one case-control study in Italy.<sup>97</sup> The same group also found no worsening of FMD severity during repeated waves of COVID-19 infection.<sup>98</sup>

Over time, however, an increasing number of FMD cases have since been described, which has helped elucidate the spectrum of functional manifestations and their impact on clinical services. One single-center study demonstrated a 60.1% increase in new patients diagnosed with FMD during the pandemic.<sup>99</sup> The most common FMDs presenting to their clinic were hyperkinetic disorders, including tremor (53.3%), followed by dystonia (31.1%), myoclonus (17.8%), tics (8.9%), and stereotypy (8.9%). In 20% of cases, multiple types of FMD co-existed.

Tic-like behaviors in children and adolescents have also generated a lot of interest recently.<sup>100,101</sup> In many cases, these were functional tic-like behaviors, and there has been growing concern that social media, such as TikTok, has been fueling this pandemic.<sup>102</sup> A recent study found that 18.2% of new patients presenting with functional tics had preceding exposure to tic-like content on social media.<sup>103</sup> Similar to another study, all of these cases were young female patients with a phenomenology different to classic tics, namely more complex movements and an abrupt worsening when in the presence of others.<sup>104</sup>

Severe FMD cases resulting in hospitalization have also been reported. One study reported that 78.9% of their FMD patients required hospitalization because of symptom severity.<sup>105</sup> This included opisthotonic crises, dystonic features (43.3%), gait disorders including forced slowness, unsteadiness and cautious gait (41%), tremor (10.3%), functional tics, and non-epileptic seizures (5.1%). These patients also tended to have co-existing past mental health history (41% of cases), including prior psychological trauma. Fifty-three percent of patients were unable to work because of symptom severity, leading to significant socioeconomic implications.<sup>105</sup>

Furthermore, a significant proportion of COVID-19 survivors develop neuropsychiatric manifestations (up to 43%), including affective or post-traumatic stress disorders.<sup>106</sup> Psychological

distress is likely to affect sicker patients and this was more common in intensive care unit (ICU)-admitted patients (46.9%) compared to ward patients (23.5%).<sup>107</sup> One example is a 54-year-old man, who developed functional head movements 2 months following severe COVID-19 infection.<sup>108</sup> He had developed significant neuropsychiatric symptoms, including severe anxiety and depression, cognitive impairment, fatigue, frequent headaches, and sleeping difficulties, which persisted for 1 year.

With the development of effective COVID-19 vaccinations, we have started to see less severe COVID-19-related illnesses. New challenges have arisen, however, with increasing reports of neurological side effects, including functional ones. These can include non-epileptic seizures, unexplained hemi-body sensory loss and bilateral facial weakness.<sup>109,110</sup> As reported in other vaccination campaigns, an “immunization stress-related response” might play an important role.<sup>111</sup> It is important to delineate if the type of adverse reaction is because of the vaccine itself or a stress reaction in the setting of vaccine administration.<sup>112</sup> The blurring of these two very different types of reactions can lead to spreading of misinformation surrounding COVID-19 vaccination and drive vaccine hesitancy.<sup>109</sup>

It is, therefore, important for clinicians to continue sharing their clinical experiences during the pandemic to appreciate the full magnitude of COVID-19-related functional disorders, including FMD following vaccination. Given the high prevalence of neuropsychiatric symptoms, a multidisciplinary approach is clearly needed.

## Conclusion

As our knowledge and experience of COVID-19 and movement disorders continues to grow, there is a real need to parse the relevant information to plan for care for these patients in the short-term (given ongoing infections) and the long-term. We need to be able to advise patients of their specific risk from SARS-CoV-2 in the short- and long-term. We also need to understand, which aspects of movement disorders are directly related to SARS-CoV-2 infection and, which aspects may be related to unmasking or lockdowns. Similarly, we need to understand the specific risk of SARS-CoV-2 in patients with movement disorders independent of confounding factors. Finally, in view of the increase in FMD occurring in the setting of infection and vaccination, a high degree of clinical suspicion is required in all new acute movement disorders for appropriate treatments and resource planning. Given the long-term neuropsychiatric effects of COVID-19, one might expect that a FMD pandemic is more likely than a parkinsonian one.

## Author Roles

(1) Research project: A. Conception, B. Organization, C. Execution; (2) Statistical Analysis: A. Design, B. Execution, C.

Review and Critique; (3) Manuscript: A. Writing of the First Draft, B. Review and Critique.

C.F.: 1B, 1C, 3A.

A.F.: 1A, 3B.

W.F.: 1B, 1C, 3A.

## Disclosures

**Ethical Compliance Statement:** The authors confirm that they have read the Journal's position on issues involved in ethical publication and affirm that this work is consistent with those guidelines. The authors confirm that the approval of an institutional review board or patient consent was not required for this work.

**Funding Sources and Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare that there are no funding sources or conflicts of interest relevant to this paper.

**Financial Disclosures for the Previous 12 Months:** C.F. is supported by an Edmond J. Safra Fellowship in Movement Disorders from The Michael J. Fox Foundation. A.F. received research support from Medtronic, Boston Scientific, University of Toronto, The Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research and Dystonia Medical Research Foundation, and honoraria from Abbott, Brainlab, UCB Pharma, Medtronic, Novartis, Boston Scientific, AbbVie, Ipsen, and Sunovion for serving as a speaker and/or consultant. W.F. is supported by the Movement Disorders Surgical Fellowship Program in Toronto Western Hospital and Abbott.

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