OBJECTIVES: To determine if early CNS symptoms are associated with severe coronavirus disease 2019.

DESIGN: A retrospective, observational case series study design.

SETTING: Electronic health records were reviewed for patients from five healthcare systems across the state of Florida, United States.

PATIENTS: A clinical sample (n = 36,615) of patients with confirmed diagnosis of coronavirus disease 2019 were included. Twelve percent (n = 4,417) of the sample developed severe coronavirus disease 2019, defined as requiring critical care, mechanical ventilation, or diagnosis of acute respiratory distress syndrome, sepsis, or severe inflammatory response syndrome.

INTERVENTIONS: None.

MEASUREMENT AND MAIN RESULTS: We reviewed the electronic health record for diagnosis of early CNS symptoms (encephalopathy, headache, ageusia, anosmia, dizziness, acute cerebrovascular disease) between 14 days before the diagnosis of coronavirus disease 2019 and 8 days after the diagnosis of coronavirus disease 2019, or before the date of severe coronavirus disease 2019 diagnosis, whichever came first. Hierarchical logistic regression models were used to examine the odds of developing severe coronavirus disease 2019 based on diagnosis of early CNS symptoms. Severe coronavirus disease 2019 patients were significantly more likely to have early CNS symptoms (32.8%) compared with nonsevere patients (6.11%; χ²[1] = 3,266.08, p < 0.0001, φ = 0.29). After adjusting for demographic variables and pertinent comorbidities, early CNS symptoms were significantly associated with severe coronavirus disease 2019 (odds ratio = 3.21). Diagnosis of encephalopathy (odds ratio = 14.38) was associated with greater odds of severe coronavirus disease 2019; whereas diagnosis of anosmia (odds ratio = 0.45), ageusia (odds ratio = 0.46), and headache (odds ratio = 0.63) were associated with reduced odds of severe coronavirus disease 2019.

CONCLUSIONS: Early CNS symptoms, and specifically encephalopathy, are differentially associated with risk of severe coronavirus disease 2019 and may serve as an early marker for differences in clinical disease course. Therapies for early coronavirus disease 2019 are scarce, and further identification of subgroups at risk may help to advance understanding of the severity trajectories and enable focused treatment.

KEY WORDS: central nervous system; coronavirus disease 2019; critical care; encephalopathy

Although coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is primarily considered a respiratory illness, its multisystem pathology manifests with dysfunction in other systems, including the CNS. Prevalence of CNS symptomology in COVID-19 varies widely based on COVID severity and study
methodology. Nonetheless, CNS symptoms are commonly found in COVID-19 patients (1–3). A systematic review examining 31 studies consisting of hospitalized patients found that 9–17% of patients reported dizziness, 6–33% reported headaches, 8% of patients experienced impairment in consciousness, and 1.6–2.5% of patients suffered ischemic strokes (3). Anosmia and ageusia are also exceedingly common in patients with COVID-19, with reported rates as high as 85% and 88%, respectively (2). An early study from Wuhan, China, showed that patients with severe COVID-19 were more likely to have comorbid CNS symptoms (i.e., impaired consciousness, acute cerebrovascular disease) relative to patients with less severe respiratory issues (1). Conversely, anosmia and ageusia were found to be associated with a milder disease course (1, 4). More recently, several studies have found that the presence of early CNS symptoms (eCNSsx), notably encephalopathy and stroke, predicts increased mortality and worsened outcomes (5–7) in COVID-19 patients. Herein, we aim to address the presence of eCNSsx in COVID-19 as a potential risk factor for disease severity and progression and provide insight into early recognition and therapeutic time windows in COVID-19 as this has not been examined in a large empirical study.

**METHODS**

This study was approved by the University of Florida’s Institutional Review Board (202001860) including waiver of informed consent. De-identified electronic health record (EHR) data were aggregated from the OneFlorida Clinical Research Consortium (8) that is comprised of five partners the University of Florida Health, Tallahassee Memorial Hospital, Orlando Health, University of Miami Health, and AdventHealth. All partners provided weekly EHR updates for a COVID-19 dataset. All partners used Epic as their EHR management software. The dates of extracted clinical data ranged from January 1, 2020, to October 25, 2020. Extracted variables of interest included diagnosis of COVID-19, COVID-19 severity, presence of eCNSsx, demographic variables (age, sex, race, ethnicity), and history of preexisting comorbidities thought to increase risk of severe disease progression course (9).

The present study is an EHR-based retrospective observational case series. The index date for all windows of observation was defined as the date of confirmed COVID-19 diagnosis. For all patients, diagnosis of eCNSsx was identified in the EHRs starting from 2 weeks prior to the index date (the presumed maximum incubation period for the virus [10]) to 8 days after the index date (median number of days from diagnosis to hospitalization [11]) or the date on which the patient developed severe COVID-19, whichever came first. All patients underwent reverse-transcriptase polymerase chain reaction (PCR)-based clinical testing. To increase diagnostic precision of the coronavirus disease positive (COVID+ ) sample, a patient was considered COVID+ if all three of the following criteria were met in the EHR: 1) a recorded positive laboratory test result; 2) an associated International Classification of Diseases, 10th Revision diagnosis; and 3) manually “flagged” by their healthcare providers as being COVID+ (e.g., based on outside laboratory tests).

Patients were classified as having severe COVID-19 if they required intensive care treatment (i.e., admission to ICU), required mechanical ventilation, or if medical records indicated a diagnosis of sepsis, acute respiratory distress syndrome, systemic inflammatory response syndrome, or hypoxic respiratory failure (Supplemental Table 1, http://links.lww.com/CCX/A683). Medical comorbidities observed to increase the risk of severe COVID-19 were also examined (9). Specifically, we examined asthma, hypoxemia, diabetes, chronic kidney disease (CKD), obesity, tobacco use, immunodeficiency, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease “prior” to COVID infection (i.e., –14 d or earlier from index date). eCNSsx were derived from studies out of Wuhan, China, and Europe and included anosmia, ageusia, dizziness, headache, ataxia, and encephalopathy (1, 2) (Table 1). Encephalopathy specifically, included the diagnostic codes for disorientation, altered mental status, impaired consciousness, toxic encephalopathy, metabolic encephalopathy, and encephalopathy NOS due its incongruent definition. Hierarchal logistic regression was conducted to test the hypothesis that eCNSsx was associated with severe COVID-19, after controlling for demographic variables and pertinent comorbidities. The data from this sample is a clinically derived observational sample across multiple institutions. As such, there is an inherent selection bias toward individuals who are physically located near one of the five regional networks that provided data and patients who can afford clinical care in nonemergent cases. Efforts to reduce the effects
of bias were conducted by controlling for gender, ethnicity, and race in all subsequent analyses.

**RESULTS**

The clinical sample consisted of $n = 36,615$ COVID+ patients, with 12.1% ($n = 4,417$) of the sample diagnosed with severe COVID-19 (Table 2). Severe COVID patients were significantly older ($t[36,613] = 58.67$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.97$), had a higher proportion of males ($\chi^2[1] = 143.36$, $p < 0.001$, $\psi = 0.06$), and were more likely to be diagnosed with medical comorbidities ($\chi^2[1] = 1,068.99$, $p < 0.0001$, $\varphi = 0.17$). Relative to White patients, self-identified Black patients ($\chi^2[1] = 41.39$, $p < 0.0001$, $\varphi = 0.04$), and those with race listed as “Other” ($\chi^2[1] = 26.41$, $p < 0.0001$, $\varphi = 0.09$) had a greater likelihood of developing severe COVID-19. There were fewer self-identified Hispanic patients with severe COVID-19, relative to non-Hispanics ($\chi^2[1] = 8.841$, $p = 0.003$, $\varphi = 0.02$).

Nearly half (48.9%) of the severe COVID-19 cohort were diagnosed with at least one comorbidity thought to increase the risk of severe COVID, which was significantly higher than the nonsevere group (25.3%; $\chi^2[1] = 1,068.99$, $p < 0.0001$, $\varphi = 0.17$) (Table 1). Severe COVID-19 patients were significantly more likely to be diagnosed with all defined comorbidities, with the exception of immunodeficiency, relative to the nonsevere group (all $p$’s < 0.05). When entered into a hierarchical logistic regression predicting severe COVID-19 (Table 3), the odds of developing severe COVID-19 in patients with a preexisting comorbidity was 38% higher in patients with no comorbidities (odds ratio [OR], 1.38; 95% CI, 1.28–1.49). Although there is a higher prevalence of almost all comorbidities in the severe group, an exploratory post hoc analysis found that only pre-COVID diagnosis of hypoxemia (OR, 1.98; 95% CI, 1.51–2.60), diabetes (OR, 1.71; 95% CI, 1.54–2.60), CKD (OR, 1.32; 95% CI, 1.15–1.51), and obesity (OR, 1.12; 95% CI, 1.00–1.25) were associated
with higher odds of severe COVID-19 when all comor-
biddies were simultaneously entered into a multivar-
tiate logistic regression model (Table 4). Odds of severe 
COVID-19 was further increased based on the number 
of comorbidities, as the odds of severe COVID-19 was 
significantly higher in patients with 1–2 comorbidities 
(OR, 1.22; 95% CI, 1.13–1.33) and 3+ comorbidities 
(OR, 1.84; 95% CI, 1.65–2.04) compared with patients 
with no comorbidities.

Overall, the proportion of severe COVID patients 
who displayed eCNSsx (32.8%) was significantly 
larger than the nonsevere group of COVID patients 
(6.11%; χ²[1] = 3,266.08, p < 0.0001, φ = 0.29). Severe 
COVID+ patients were more likely to be diagnosed 
with encephalopathy (χ²[1] = 4,718.42, p < 0.0001, 
φ = 0.36); whereas nonsevere COVID+ patients 
were more likely to have a diagnosis of anosmia (χ²[1] = 20.44, 
φ = 0.25), ageusia (χ²[1] = 11.24, p = 0.0008, 
φ = 0.24), and headache (χ²[1] = 40.00, p < 0.0001). No 
patients were diagnosed with dizziness or acute cere-
brovascular disease and were not considered in further 
analyses.

After controlling for demographic variables and 
history of comorbidities, the odds of developing severe 
COVID-19 in patients who displayed eCNSsx was 3.21 
times higher than those who did not display eCNSsx 
(OR, 3.21; 95% CI, 2.93–3.53) (Table 3). Post hoc anal- 
yses of individual eCNSsx showed that diagnosis of 
anosmia (χ²[1] = 10.57, p = 0.001, φ = 0.16), ageusia (χ²[1] = 11.24, p = 0.0008, 
φ = 0.24), and headache (χ²[1] = 40.00, p < 0.0001). No 
patients were diagnosed with dizziness or acute cere-
brovascular disease and were not considered in further 
analyses.

**TABLE 2.**

| Variable of Interest | COVID+ | Nonsevere COVID | Severe COVID | Test Statistic |
|----------------------|--------|-----------------|--------------|---------------|
| n (%)                | 36,615 (100) | 32,198 (87.9) | 4,417 (12.1) | t(36,613) = 58.67, p < 0.001, d = 0.97 |
| Mean, age (sd)       | 43.3 (20.5) | 41.0 (19.7) | 59.4 (18.4) | χ²(1) = 143.36, p < 0.001, φ = 0.06 |
| Sex, n (%)           | χ²(4) = 4,424.37, p < 0.001, V = 0.17 |
| Female               | 19,868 (54.3) | 17,843 (55.4) | 2,025 (45.8) | χ²(1) = 0.56, p = 0.46, φ = 0.00 |
| Male                 | 16,747 (45.7) | 14,355 (44.6) | 2,392 (54.2) | χ²(1) = 41.39, p < 0.0001, φ = 0.04 |
| Racea, n (%)         | χ²(2) = 269.15, p < 0.0001, V = 0.06 |
| White                | 14,623 (39.9) | 12,717 (39.5) | 1,906 (43.2) | χ²(1) = 26.41, p < 0.0001, φ = 0.09 |
| Asian                | 550 (1.5) | 478 (1.5) | 72 (1.6) | χ²(1) = 0.56, p = 0.46, φ = 0.00 |
| Black                | 7,335 (20.0) | 6,145 (19.1) | 1,190 (26.9) | χ²(1) = 41.39, p < 0.0001, φ = 0.04 |
| Other                | 10,077 (27.5) | 8,987 (27.9) | 1,090 (24.7) | χ²(1) = 26.41, p < 0.0001, φ = 0.09 |
| Unknown              | 4,030 (11.0) | 3,871 (12.0) | 159 (3.6) | χ²(1) = 246.09, p < 0.0001, φ = 0.34 |
| Ethnicityb, n (%)    | χ²(2) = 250.26, p < 0.0001, φ = 0.10 |
| Non-Hispanic         | 19,124 (52.2) | 16,506 (51.3) | 2,618 (59.3) | χ²(1) = 8.841, p = 0.003, φ = 0.02 |
| Hispanic             | 11,578 (31.6) | 10,122 (31.4) | 1,456 (33.0) | χ²(1) = 250.26, p < 0.0001, φ = 0.10 |
| Unknown              | 5,913 (16.1) | 5,570 (17.3) | 343 (7.8) | χ²(1) = 250.26, p < 0.0001, φ = 0.10 |

COVID = coronavirus disease.

*Post hoc comparisons of race compared the proportion of self-identified minorities relative to Whites.

*Post hoc comparisons of ethnicity compared with non-Hispanic ethnicity.

Bolded test statistics represent the omnibus analysis; post hoc analyses are not bolded.
(Table 4). In further exploratory, post hoc analyses, there was a significant interaction between the diagnosis of encephalopathy and obesity (OR, 1.83; 95% CI, 1.06–3.41). No other encephalopathy and comorbidity interactions were significant (Table 4).

Finally, we explored the temporal relationship between diagnosis of COVID-19, duration until patients were classified as severe, and the latency of eCNSsx and severe disease. On average, patients met the classification of “severe” 0.73 days (sd = 4.15 d) from when they were diagnosed with COVID-19 based on PCR-based testing. Table 5 displays the relationship between diagnosis of eCNSsx and development of severe COVID-19. Across all eCNSsx, the diagnosis of eCNSsx preceded the onset of severe COVID-19 by an average of 0.73 days (sd = 4.15 d). Notably, 5.1% of patients were diagnosed with encephalopathy prior to development of severe COVID-19 and 96.3% of the patients were diagnosed with encephalopathy before or concurrent with the development of severe COVID-19.

### DISCUSSION

To our knowledge, this is the first study to systematically evaluate the relationship between eCNSsx and COVID-19 severity in a large, multicenter clinical sample. In this large study, we found that patients with eCNSsx had 3.21 times higher odds of developing severe COVID-19 compared with patients without eCNSsx. Consistent with prior literature, anosmia and ageusia were associated with a milder disease course (12). Encephalopathy specifically was associated with a much greater odds of severe COVID-19. This is consistent with prior studies linking increased morbidity and mortality to encephalopathic patients with COVID-19 (13). However, this is the first study, to our knowledge, that demonstrates an association of early encephalopathy and COVID severity.

In addition, our findings are aligned with the numerous other studies that found an association with age, gender, race, and ethnicity with COVID-19 severity (12). Similarly, we found that preexisting

### TABLE 3.
Hierarchal Logistic Regression Predicting Severe Coronavirus Disease 2019

| Variable                   | Step 1   | Step 2   | Step 3   |
|----------------------------|----------|----------|----------|
|                           | aOR (95% CI) | aOR (95% CI) | aOR (95% CI) |
| Age                       | 1.05 (1.04–1.05) | 1.05 (1.04–1.05) | 1.05 (1.04–1.05) |
| Sex (reference group = female) | 1.64 (1.53–1.75) | 1.67 (1.56–1.79) | 1.71 (1.59–1.83) |
| Race (reference group = White) |          |          |          |
| Asian                      | 1.27 (0.96–1.65) | 1.30 (0.99–1.70) | 1.32 (1.00–1.73) |
| Black                      | 1.81 (1.65–1.98) | 1.74 (1.59–1.90) | 1.73 (1.58–1.90) |
| Other                      | 0.80 (0.73–0.88) | 0.86 (0.78–0.94) | 0.91 (0.83–1.00) |
| Unknown                    | 0.34 (0.28–0.42) | 0.37 (0.30–0.46) | 0.40 (0.32–0.50) |
| Hispanic (reference group = no) |          |          |          |
| Yes                        | 1.48 (1.35–1.62) | 1.48 (1.35–1.62) | 1.44 (1.31–1.57) |
| Unknown                    | 0.86 (0.73–1.00) | 0.91 (0.78–1.06) | 0.91 (0.78–1.06) |
| With comorbidities         |          | 1.38 (1.28–1.49) | 1.37 (1.27–1.48) |
| With early CNS symptoms    |          |          |          |
| Akaike information criterion | 22,650 | 22,580 | 22,029 |

aOR = adjusted odds ratio.

Results of the primary analysis, examining the odds of developing severe coronavirus disease 2019 based on the presence of any early CNS symptoms, after controlling for demographic variables and known comorbidities.
comorbidities such as diabetes, CKD, and obesity were associated with a more severe disease course and displayed a compounding effect when more than one comorbidity was present (9).

It should be noted that the diagnostic term “encephalopathy” in our cohort was used as a clinical bridge for the multiple and varying degree of descriptors used to diagnose acute CNS impairment. Such descriptors included altered mental status, disorientation, impaired consciousness, and encephalopathy itself. To date, the neurologic literature has yet provided a reliable diagnostic algorithm to discriminate acute encephalopathy from other forms of acute brain dysfunction. Such a term is often used to define a broad range of neurologic alterations, presenting researchers with some diagnostic uncertainty. However, at present, it remains the best surrogate for acute brain dysfunction in COVID-19 and the literature alike.

Uniquely within our cohort, we show that 96.3% of our severe COVID-19 patients were diagnosed with encephalopathy either before or on the same day that they were classified as “severe” (i.e., required mechanical ventilation, admitted to ICU). Such a unimodal distribution of disease severity and encephalopathy suggests that acute brain dysfunction in severe COVID-19 is an early identifiable symptomology that predicts disease severity. Furthermore, its early recognition may aide clinician decision making in time to therapeutic intervention and escalation of care. Of interest, our sample also aimed to assess the presence of encephalopathy and comorbid interactions. Our data found that patients with clinical obesity and encephalopathy were 1.83 times more likely to develop severe COVID-19, suggesting a link between its pathogenesis and acute brain dysfunction. No other comorbidities were significant for such interaction. Current neuropathologic studies do not suggest that acute brain dysfunction in COVID-19 is related to direct neural invasion or hypoxic ischemic encephalopathy but rather microglial activation and neuronophagia from systemic inflammation (13). Such findings suggest that encephalopathy and its predictive nature of severe COVID may be a variable indicating the need for systemic anti-inflammatory therapy.

As with any retrospective analysis, limitations are inherent. The majority of our cohort was diagnosed with nonsevere COVID-19 similar to national trends.

### TABLE 4.
Adjusted Odds Ratios of Severe Coronavirus Disease 2019 Based on Presence of Comorbidities and CNS Symptoms

| Variable of Interest                        | Adjusted OR (95% CI) |
|--------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Comorbidities                              |                      |
| Asthma                                     | 0.93 (0.80–1.08)     |
| Hypoxemia                                  | 1.98 (1.51–2.60)     |
| Diabetes                                   | 1.71 (1.54–2.60)     |
| Hypertension                               | 0.94 (0.86–1.04)     |
| CKD                                        | 1.32 (1.15–1.51)     |
| Obesity                                    | 1.12 (1.00–1.25)     |
| Tobacco use                                | 1.05 (0.90–1.22)     |
| Immunodeficiency                           | 1.03 (0.56–1.80)     |
| COPD                                       | 1.06 (0.89–1.27)     |
| Number of comorbidities                    |                      |
| 0 comorbidities (reference)                | 1.22 (1.13–1.33)     |
| 1–2 comorbidities                         | 1.84 (1.65–2.04)     |
| Early CNS symptoms                         |                      |
| Anosmia                                    | 0.45 (0.23–0.79)     |
| Ageusia                                    | 0.46 (0.21–0.89)     |
| Headache                                   | 0.63 (0.51–0.77)     |
| Ataxia                                     | 2.06 (0.22–17.47)    |
| Encephalopathy                             | 14.38 (12.33–16.82)  |
| Encephalopathy × comorbidity interaction   |                      |
| Encephalopathy × asthma                    | 1.34 (0.69–2.81)     |
| Encephalopathy × hypoxia                   | 0.74 (0.24–3.25)     |
| Encephalopathy × diabetes                  | 0.45 (0.33–0.64)     |
| Encephalopathy × hypertension              | 0.31 (0.23–0.42)     |
| Encephalopathy × CKD                       | 0.32 (0.21–0.48)     |
| Encephalopathy × obesity                   | 1.83 (1.06–3.41)     |
| Encephalopathy × tobacco use               | 1.01 (0.56–1.91)     |
| Encephalopathy × COPD                      | 0.35 (0.21–0.59)     |

CKD = chronic kidney disease, COPD = chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, OR = odds ratio.

OR predicting severe coronavirus disease 2019 by comorbidities after controlling for demographic variables, early CNS symptoms (eCNSsx) after controlling for demographic variables and presence of any comorbidity, and encephalopathy × comorbidity interaction after controlling for demographic variables, comorbidities, and eCNSsx.
Twelve percent of our patient population was diagnosed with severe COVID-19, with the large majority (\(n = 2,317\)) diagnosed within 24 hours of hospital admission. This suggests that most patients sought emergent medical attention when symptoms were severe or life-threatening and multisystem International Classification of Diseases coding was at its highest. In concordance, eCNSsx and most notably encephalopathy followed a similar trend. Such findings suggest that reporting bias, especially for mild neurologic symptoms, may have led to under-coding of neurologic symptoms, potentially indicating there may be a higher proportion of patients who were encephalopathic earlier in the disease process. Analog findings were discovered early on when studying anosmia and dysgeusia where broad variations in frequency were found depending on methodology (14). Similarly, we cannot confirm the diagnostic criterion or medical decision-making process across the different sites, however, our partner sites were all large academic medical centers with high rates of COVID-19 and ICU COVID-19 capacity (15). Lastly, despite attempts to reduce limitations, selection bias toward those that could afford healthcare might skew the results to overinflate patients with more complicated presentation; however, most patients with severe COVID would likely have to seek medical attention, and this selection might be a larger consideration for mild or moderate severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 infection. Although definitive conclusions cannot be drawn due to the observational nature of this study, such limitations are hypothesis generating in that early and abrupt recognition of encephalopathy in the outpatient and nonsevere COVID cohorts may predict progression to severe COVID-19. Such consideration should be further investigated prospectively.

At present, there is a coordinated effort in the scientific community to develop therapies for early COVID-19 (16). The identification of a subgroup of patients at higher risk of severe disease may help to redirect that effort to prevent disease progression in those patients. COVID+ patients with early onset or presenting symptoms of encephalopathy may need closer monitoring, especially early in the disease process.

## TABLE 5.
Latency Between Severe Coronavirus Disease 2019 and Early CNS Symptoms Diagnosis

| Early CNS Symptom | Mean (sd), d | -14 to -4 | -3 to -2 | -1 | 0 | 1 | 2 to 3 | 4+ |
|-------------------|-------------|-----------|----------|----|---|---|--------|----|
|                   | n (%)       | n (%)     | n (%)    | n (%) | n (%) | n (%) | n (%) | n (%) |
| Anosmia           | 0.33 (0.88) | 0 (0)     | 0 (0.0)  | 0 (0.0) | 10 (83.3) | 1 (8.3) | 1 (8.3) | 0 (0) |
| Ageusia           | 1.57 (7.93) | 1 (7.1)   | 0 (0)    | 0 (0)  | 7 (50.0)  | 2 (14.3) | 1 (7.1) | 3 (21.4) |
| Headache          | 1.80 (4.47) | 11 (2.8)  | 4 (1.0)  | 1 (0.3) | 237 (59.7) | 27 (6.8) | 38 (9.6) | 79 (19.9) |
| Ataxia            | 1.10 (2.98) | 0 (0)     | 0 (0)    | 0 (0)  | 17 (81.0) | 1 (4.8)  | 1 (4.8) | 2 (9.5) |
| Encephalopathy    | 0.34 (2.60) | 35 (1.4)  | 9 (0.4)  | 18 (0.7) | 2,317 (91.2) | 42 (1.7) | 22 (0.9) | 97 (3.8) |

Negative numbers indicate early CNS symptoms diagnosed “prior” to classification of severe coronavirus disease 2019.

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Supplemental digital content is available for this article. Direct URL citations appear in the printed text and are provided in the HTML and PDF versions of this article on the journal’s website (http://journals.lww.com/ccejournal).

Research reported in this publication was supported by the University of Florida Clinical and Translational Science Institute, which is supported in part by the National Institutes of Health, National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences under award number UL1TR001427.

The authors have disclosed that they do not have any potential conflicts of interest.

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