

## Background

Physician appearance can have an effect on the doctor-patient relationship or the family members' perception of the provider, especially in high intensity first encounters like the ICU. Many hospitals have employee policies requiring that tattoos be covered and nontraditional piercings removed since they are conventionally perceived as unprofessional and potentially detrimental to establishing patient trust. Given the growing acceptance and commonality of these factors, such policies may be unnecessary and warrant revision. This study sought to determine if the presence of visible tattoos or piercings on a physician affected an individual's perception of the provider's professionalism or capabilities.

## Methods

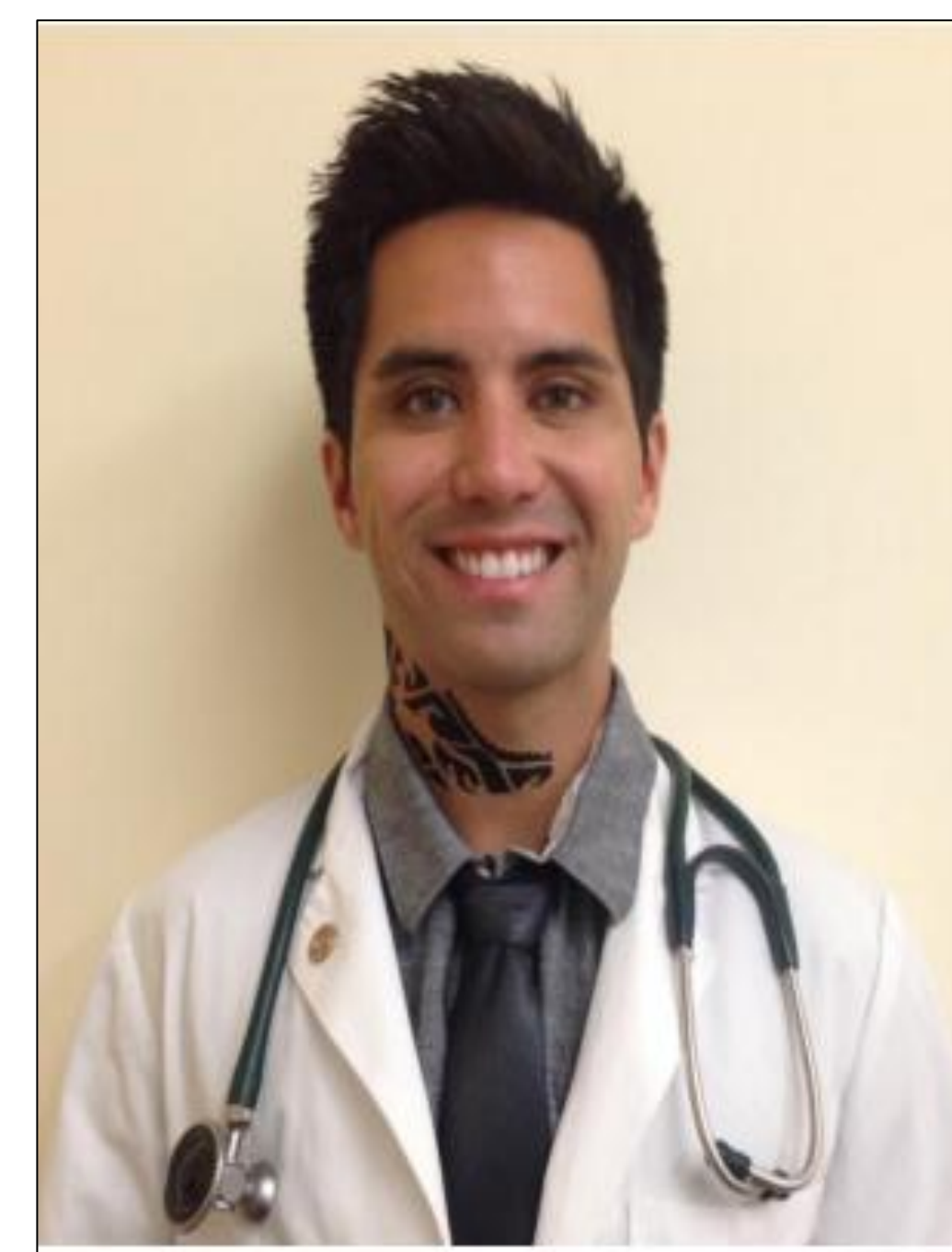
Adult volunteers were shown randomized photos of 2 "Urgent Care" medical providers, one of whom had a tattoo on his neck. They then rated their clinical confidence in each provider on a 4 point scale:

1. I am so nervous about this medical provider's ability that I am thinking of walking out and going to a hospital ER 15 minutes away.
2. I am uncomfortable with this medical provider but I will stay and have my child checked by him.
3. I am comfortable with this medical provider and having my child checked by him.
4. I am very confident in this provider and I trust the treatment that he recommends.

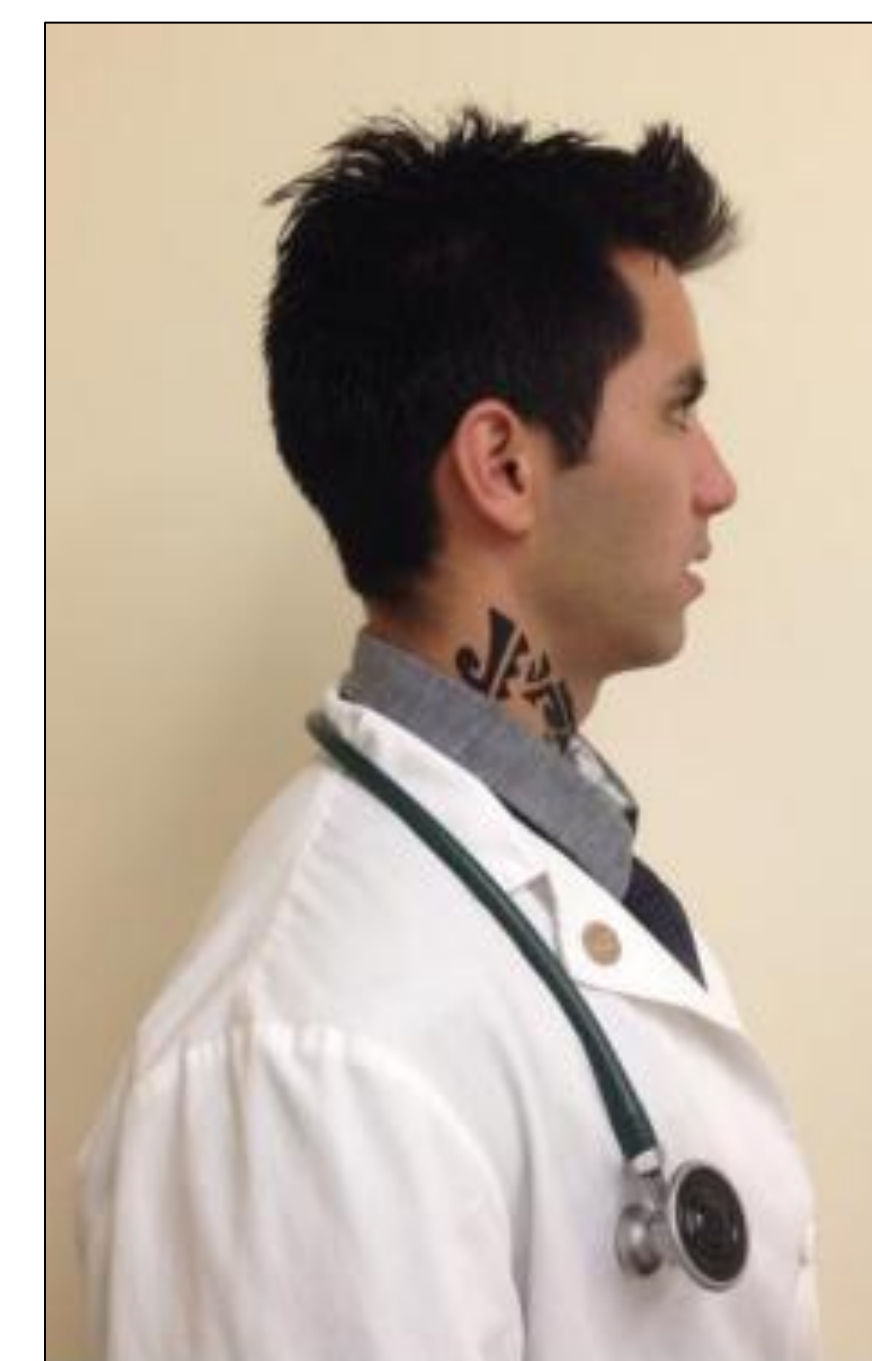
With each survey we alternated which provider had the tattoo, as well as whether the provider with the tattoo was on top or bottom.

Volunteers also assessed 3 drawings (ear ring, nose ring and both ear and nose ring) of a hypothetical provider and rated their clinical confidence on a 4 point scale:

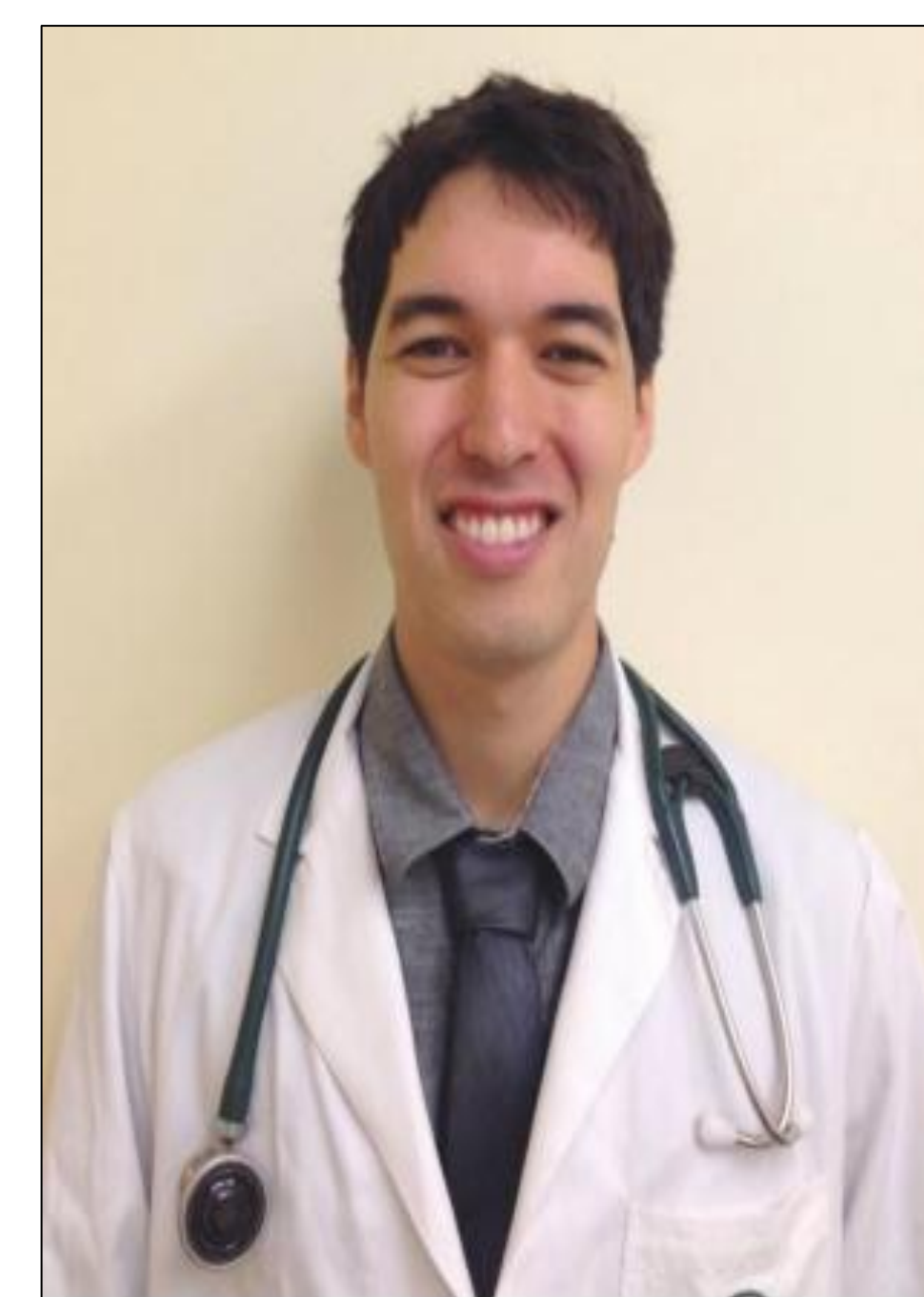
1. This would make me very nervous and I would not trust the care and advice from this medical provider.
2. This would make me slightly nervous and it would lower my trust of the care and advice from this medical provider.
3. This would not bother me at all. I would fully trust the care and advice from this medical provider.
4. This would make me trust the care and advice from this medical provider more so than if these weren't present.



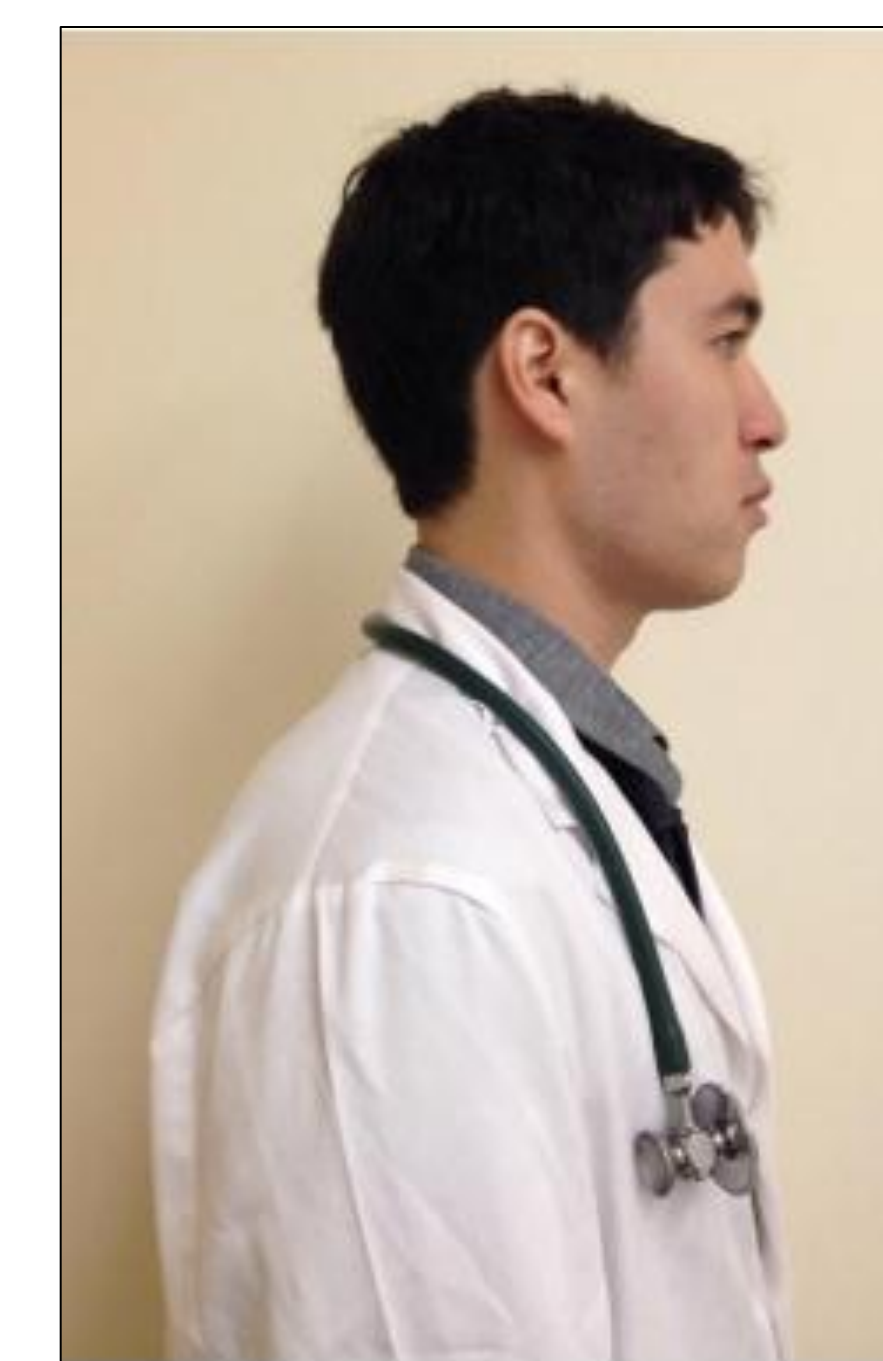
Sample Tattooed Picture of Provider A



Side Profile



Sample Non-tattooed Picture of Provider B



Side Profile



Drawing of Large Earring Piercing

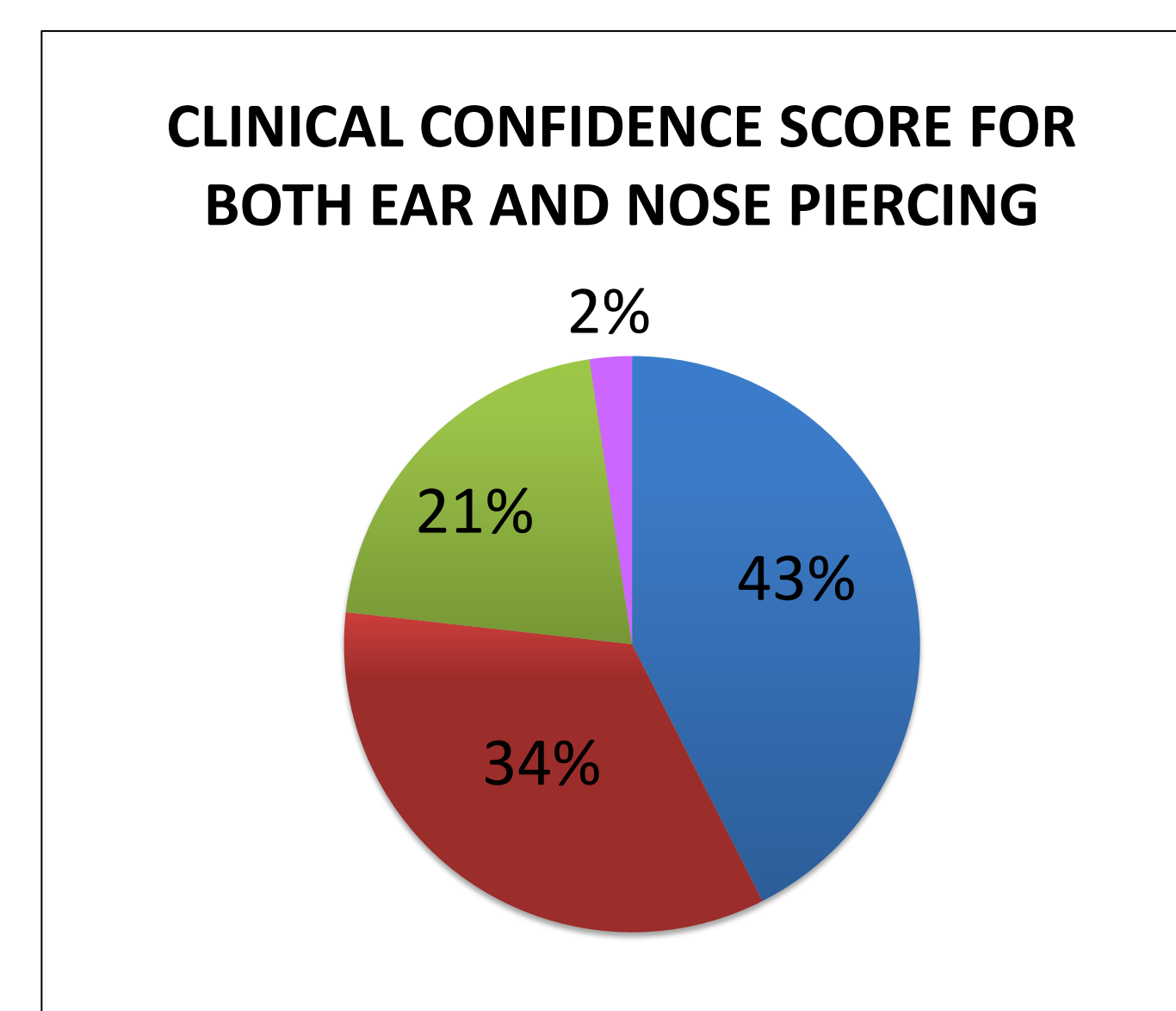
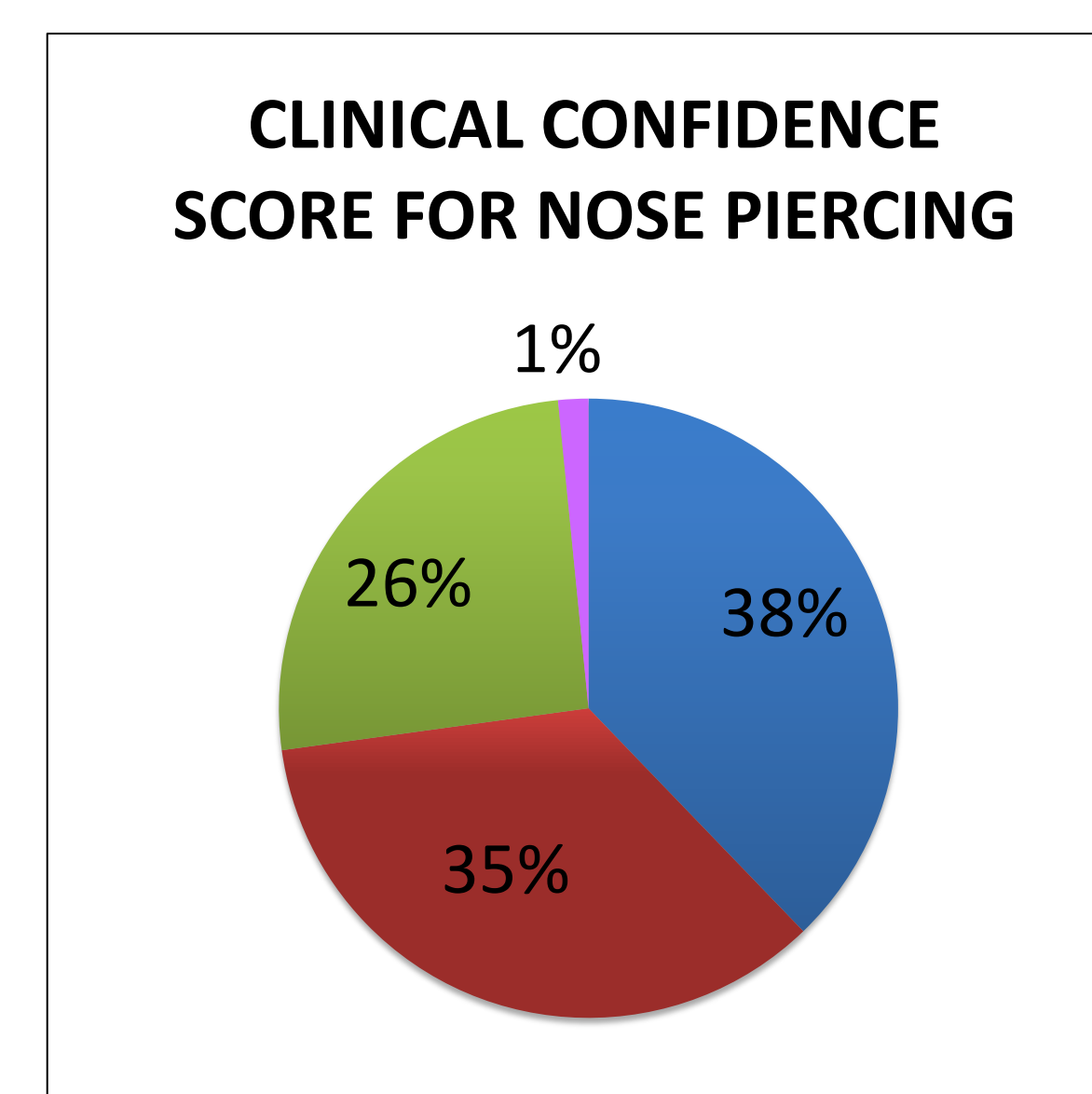
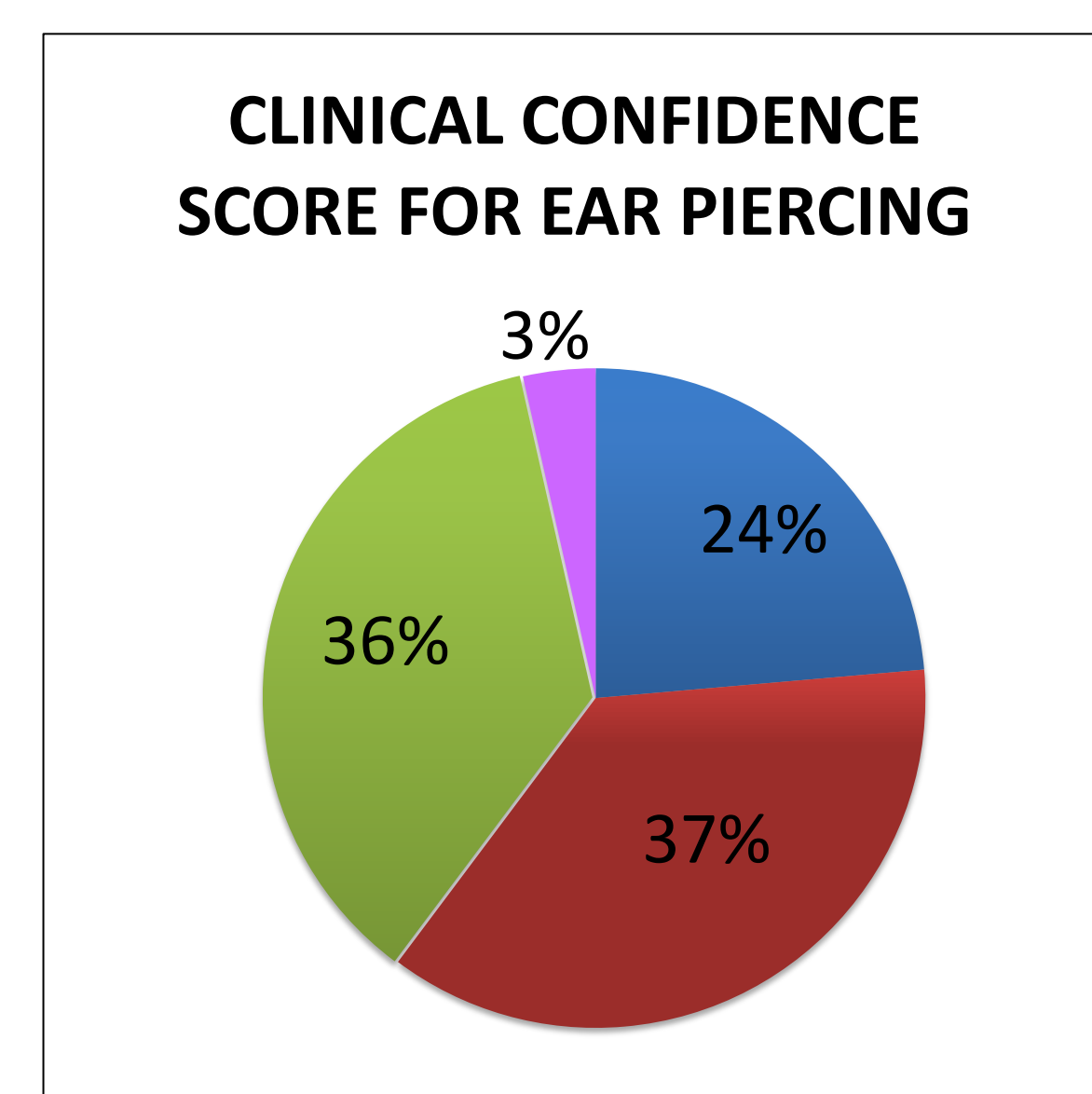
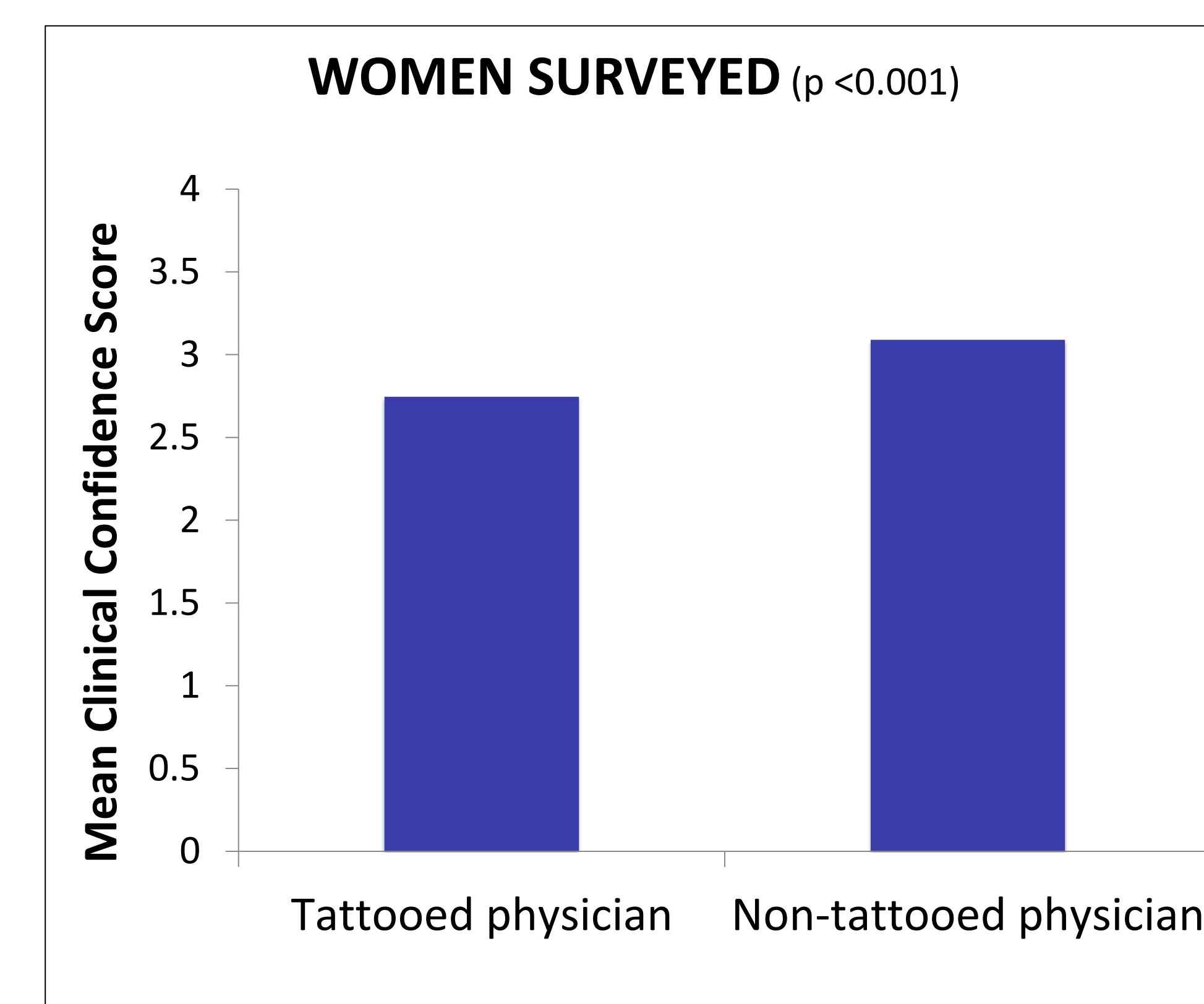
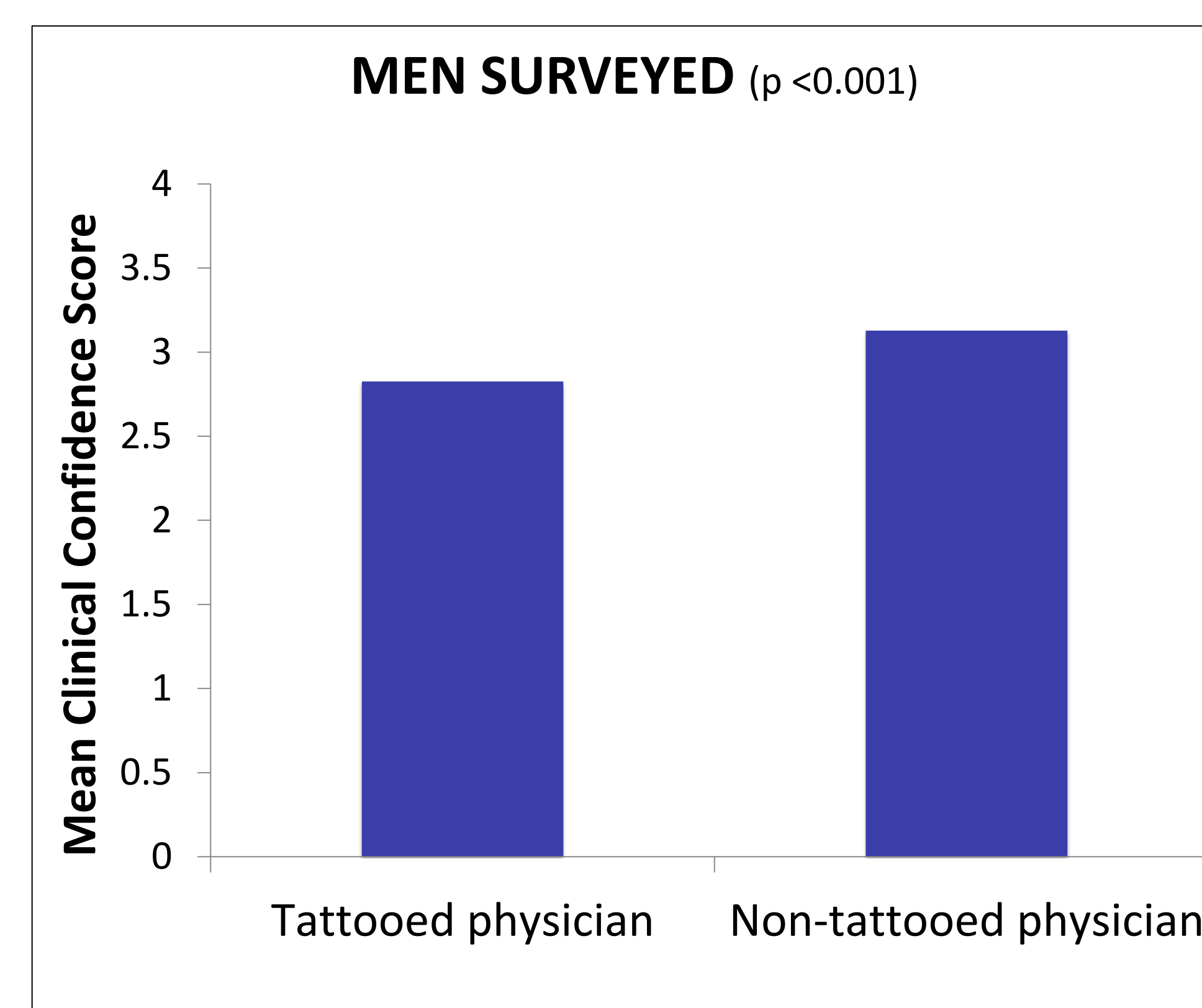
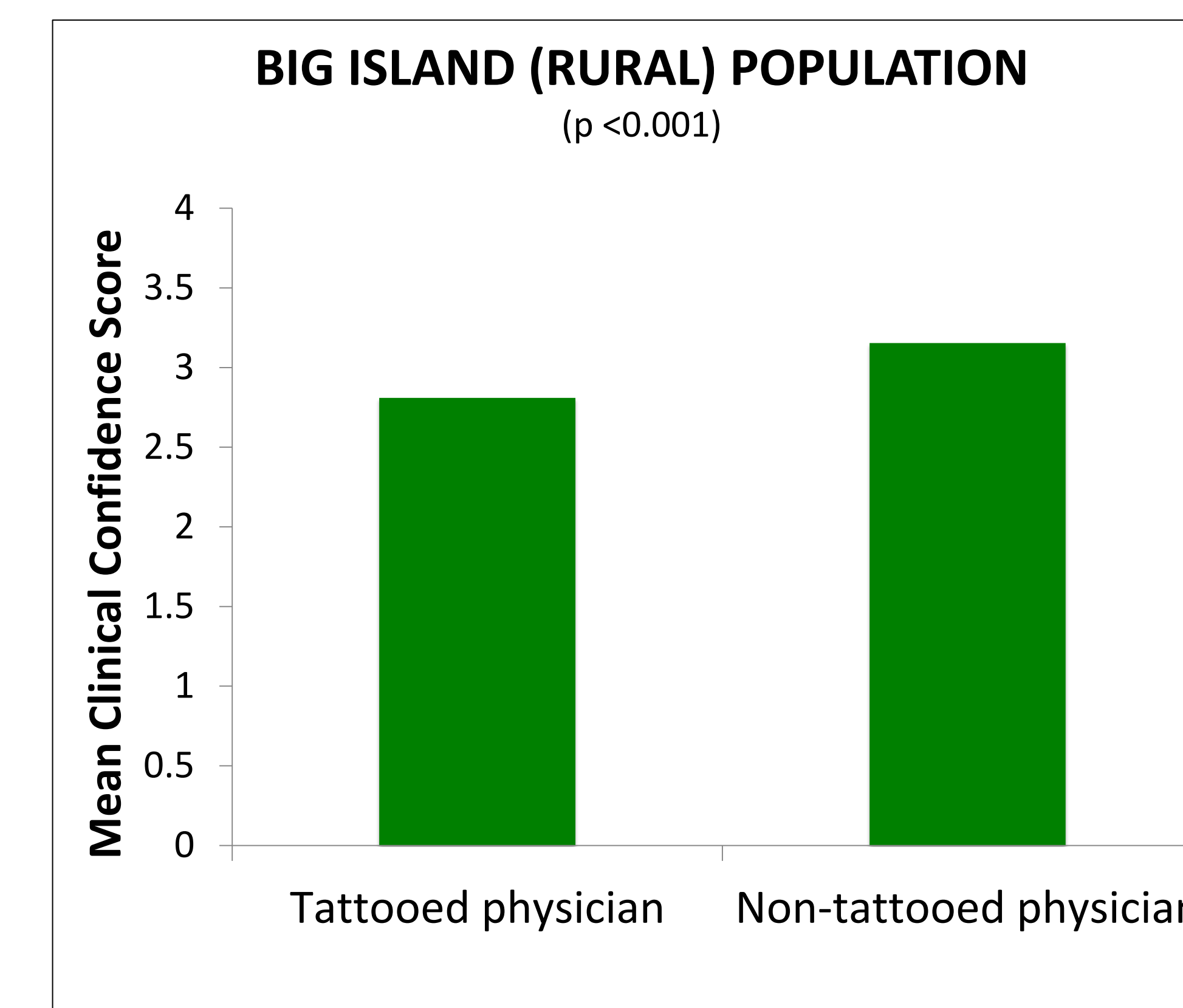
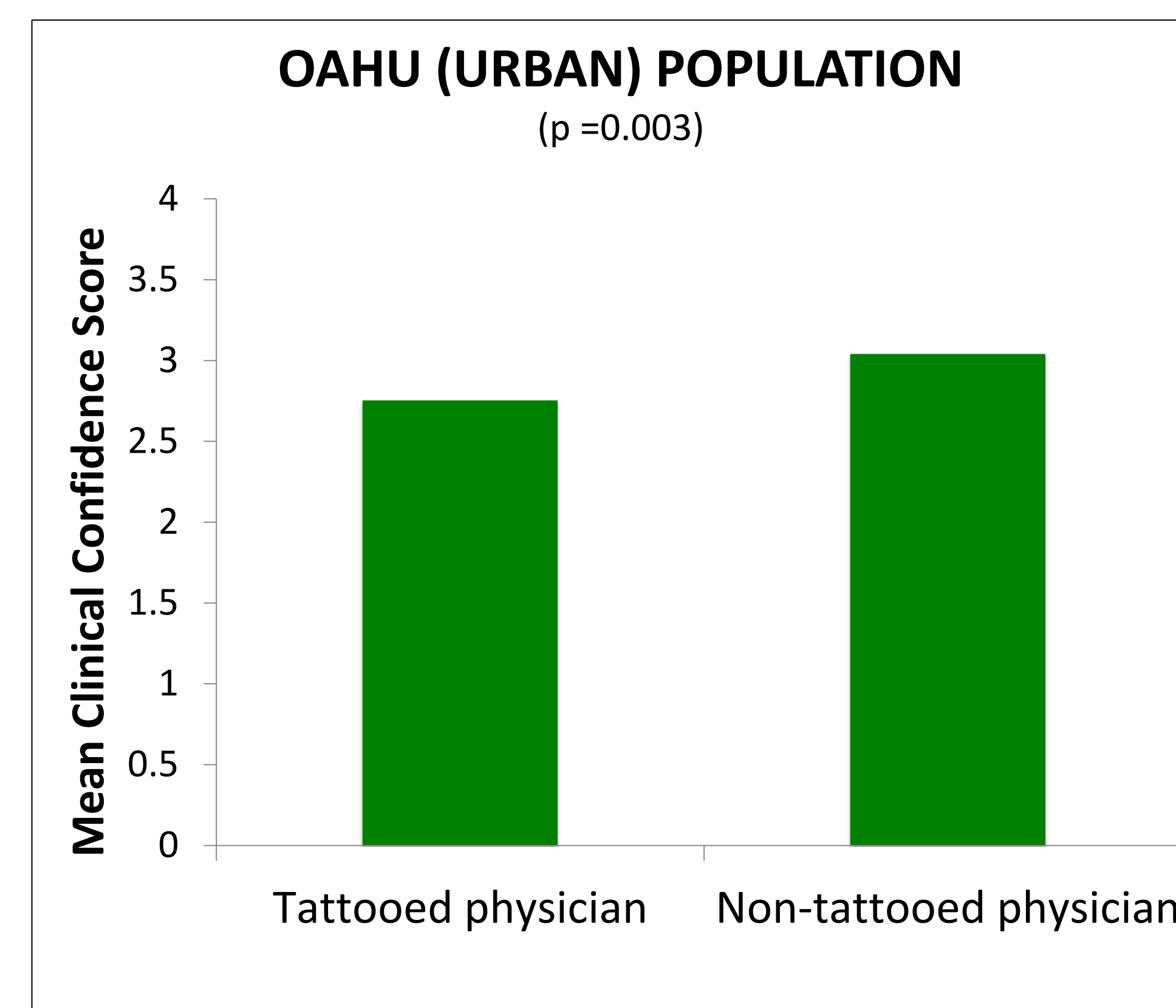
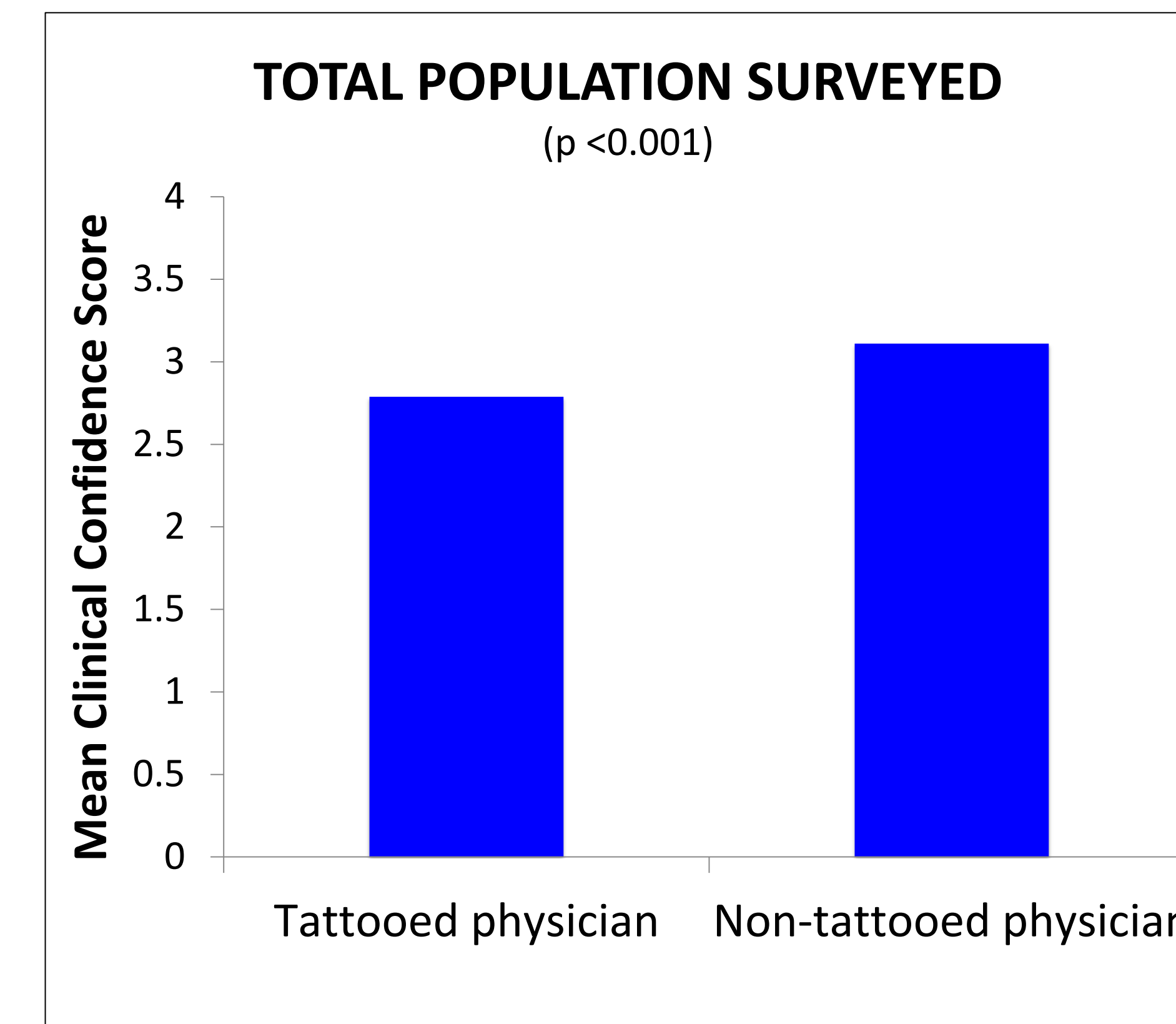


Drawing of Large Nose Ring Piercing



Drawing of Nose and Earring Piercing

## Results



- 1 This would make me very nervous and I would not trust the care and advice from this medical provider.
- 2 This would make me slightly nervous and it would lower my trust of the care and advice from this medical provider.
- 3 This would not bother me at all. I would fully trust the care and advice from this medical provider.
- 4 This would make me trust the care and advice from this medical provider more so than if these weren't present.

## Conclusions

- This study shows that patients/parents prefer providers without visible tattoos or large piercings and that such factors lower their confidence in a provider's capabilities. Hospitals and medical schools are therefore justified in establishing dress codes that require visible tattoos be covered up or large piercings removed.
- Both sexes prefer a non-tattooed provider.
- There were no significant differences between the rural and urban areas surveyed, suggesting that decreased access to healthcare does not alter this preference regarding tattoos and piercings.

## Discussion

Institutions may prefer employees without tattoos for several reasons: a perceived association with unprofessionalism, a possible detrimental effect on patient/family perception of provider competence or even the difficulty that would come with specifying or regulating what is or isn't allowed. They are then faced with the option of forbidding it and terminating those who get one or requiring that it be covered up. As tattoos become more common, such hiring restrictions may further limit the work force in what is already considered to be a "provider shortage." Physicians with tattoos or piercings may in turn argue they are a means of personal expression and that having met the same requirements as the rest of their colleagues, appearance should not matter when assessing their capabilities.

The distrust our piercing pictures incited in our subjects cannot necessarily be applied to smaller, more subtle, and more common piercings. Of note, large piercings may pose a personal safety risk given their chance of snagging or being grabbed.

Numerous study participants in Hilo chose to share that they would be happy with any physician given how hard it was to find one. Wondering if perhaps hospitals in underserved areas could consider being more relaxed on their dress code policies, we collected data in both a rural and an urban area only to find that individuals in both settings preferred a non-tattooed provider, and that large piercings greatly affected everyone's trust in the medical care and advice provided.

Another topic that should be explored further is whether there are statistically significant generational differences in preferring tattooed vs non-tattooed providers.