

Traditional Beliefs & Practices Among Graduate Mothers Regarding Various Pediatric Ailments



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Abstract

The various traditional beliefs and practices among 200 graduate mother regarding pediatric ailments were studied. Teething (62%), indigestion of milk (53%), "hot and cold" diet (33%), evil eye (31%), maternal diet (22.5%), "curse of goddess" (11%) etc. were considered to be main causes of many pediatric ailments. Restriction of feeds/diet/fruits (51%), application of amulet (33.5%), burning of chillies/application of black mark on body (17.5%), use of Janam Ghuti (15%), application of ash/soil from sacred places (11%), Jhar Phoonch (8%) etc. were main practices applied by these mothers. These mothers were mainly influenced by elders (41%), associates (31%), quacks (22.5%), teleserials (11.5%), magazines/newspapers (9%) etc. Irrespective of their educational status, the graduate mothers also believe in superstitious beliefs and practices in management of pediatric ailments and unnecessarily delay in proper timely treatment.

Introduction

The child born everywhere is at the mercy of two external forces, one that of physical environment and second one is of interconnected system of customs, habits and superstitious beliefs. These well developed and interconnected system of customs and beliefs predominate as therapeutic interventions in the management of diseases in pediatric patient (1). These practices are either out of anxiety and impatience or due to influence of elderly. The customary rituals can be : harmful, innocuous, beneficial and uncertain. Although most of the superstitious beliefs are innocuous and the adoption of these harmful beliefs may delay or hinder the management of the illness leading to increased morbidity and mortality (2). Most of the studies regarding various traditional beliefs and practices were carried out among uneducated mothers and in rural setup.

The present study was undertaken to obtain information regarding various traditional beliefs and practices employed among graduate mothers in the management of pediatric ailments.

Material and methods

The study was conducted from 1st January to 31st July, 2000 at a pediatric clinic. Two hundred graduate mothers were interviewed in depth for any type of traditional belief or practice employed for pediatric ailment prior to proper evaluation. The children were examined thoroughly for any kind of unrecognised medical problem and intervention was performed accordingly. The detailed history also included family size any type, socio-economic status and influencing factors. Health education was also imparted to each mother.

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Results

Among the children of the graduate mothers surveyed, there was male predominance (M : F = 1.6 : 1). There were 25.5% infants, while rest belonged to other age groups. All graduate mothers believed in one or other traditional beliefs and practices. One hundred and three mothers (51.5%) belonged to joint family. The average number of children per family being 1.7 (range 1-4). Among these graduate mothers, there were 53% housewives, 28% were employed in various offices, 12% were teachers, while 7% were associated with health department.

The various ailments were diarrhoea, fever, skin disorders, jaundice, seizures etc. The various beliefs regarding causation of these ailments were teething (62%), indigestion of milk (53%), "hot and cold" diet (33%), evil eye (31%), maternal diet (22.5%), "curse of goddess" (11%) etc. Restriction of feeds/diet/fruits (51%), application of amulet [sacred thread worn around neck, waist or arm to ward off evil spirit] (33.5%), application of black mark on body/burning of chillies (17.5%), use of Janam Ghuti (15%), application of ash/soil from sacred places (11%), carrying of iron item especially small knife, long iron nail alongwith them (9%), Jhar-Phoonch (8%) were the main traditional practices applied by these mothers.

These mothers were influenced mainly by elders (41%), associates (31%), quacks (22.5%), teleserials (11.5%), magazines and newspapers (9%).

Discussion

The traditional beliefs and practices still form a major constituent of the therapeutic modalities employed as primary healing practices and seem to be very common in this part of the country, which more so are seen among the people living in the joint families and the probable reason attributed to this fact is the influence of the elders (1-4).

Teething (62%) and indigestion of milk (53%) considered to be main reasons for every ailment in

present study has also been highlighted in various studies through in varying proportions (15% to 50%) (5-8). The concept of "hot and cold" foods were also seen among these educated mothers. The food items which contained more proteins and generated extra energy were considered to be "hot". Thirty-three percent mothers attributed this fact as a causation of ailment in our study. Maternal diet was considered to be one of the beliefs in causing some ailment especially in breastfed infants (9-12).

Evil eye to be a cause of pediatric ailments has been reported in many studies (1,3,4). In present study it was believed by 31% mothers that too in male children.

Any type of erythematous eruptions/rash associated with fever or not was believed to be a "curse of goddess" by 11% mothers as observed in other studies. Measles and chicken-pox are regarded as "curse of goddess" or "wrath of god" in our study (13).

Majority of these educated mothers (51%) restricted feeds/diet/fruits in many ailments especially in diarrhoea. Withholding of milk in diarrhoea especially in infants is a countrywide phenomenon (5,6,12,14). Breastfeeding must be continued despite the theoretical concern about the lactose malabsorption. Stimulation of the receptors of nipple by the continued sucking help in maintaining milk production. Breastfeeding reduces severity and complications of acute diarrhoea as withdrawal during diarrhoea apart from its deleterious effects is also associated with higher risk of dehydration (15-16). Solid foods were also withheld, which could delay or retard nutritional rehabilitation after diarrhoea, as there is no physiological basis for resting the bowel during or following acute diarrhoea (17).

The practice of restriction of salts, certain fruits especially banana and oranges and some other items still exist today in what are known to be the days of modern medicine and are seen in illnesses like cough, fever, exanthemata etc. (3,4,7,9,10).

Amulets for warding off evil spirits during disease

advocating rapid recovery from illness is a therapeutic modality being practised all over the country (1,3,14). In our study, 33.5% mothers applied this method in children having diarrhoea, febrile episodes and poor appetite. A fascinating yet interesting observation among these mothers was noticed that they used to carry iron item, especially small knife/big key/long iron nail alongwith them while bringing, especially, their male child for consultation. This was believed to save their child from evil eye.

Jhar Phoonch was used as a therapeutic modality especially in treatment of seizures, poor appetite/weight gain and prolonged pyrexia as seen in other parts of the country (1,3,7). Applying ash/soil from sacred places for skin disorders is still prevalent in our country (1,3,4). This was also seen in our study. The typical feature of application of "ash" from the household furnace (chulha) that too from a particular family, designated as the blessed one, happened to be a major therapeutic intervention in the management of pyoderma and allergic dermatitis in the present study.

Janam Ghuti was quiet frequently used for excessive crying, diarrhoea, dentitions and prior to weaning in 15% mothers in our study as observed in other parts (9,12).

The graduate mothers despite educational status are still influenced by elders, associates, religious people and quacks. Many teleserials, magazines and newspapers also highlight traditional beliefs and practices in management of various illnesses. Infact elders believe that most outer manifestations of disease are nature's cleaning processes and ways to remove the poisonous morbid matter accumulated in the system. They still believe in self-curing and avoiding drugs as far as possible. Hence the mothers out of anxiety and impatience are vulnerable to influencing factors and apply these beliefs.

Irrespective of their educational status the graduate mothers also believe in superstitious beliefs and practices in management of pediatric ailments. The present

practices, by and large harmless, mostly leads to unnecessary delay in seeking medical attention. A need arises for eradication of such unscrupulous and unrecognised interventions and this target can be achieved by appropriate health education.

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