

FREQUENCY OF HEALTH RELATED MYTHS AMONG FEMALES ADMITTED IN A TERTIARY CARE HOSPITAL

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To study frequency of myths about disease, to assess awareness among people and to propose methodology to bring changes in the attitude of community.

Study Design: Descriptive cross-sectional survey.

Place and Duration of Study: Family Wing of Combined Military Hospital Multan, from Oct 2016 to Apr 2017.

Patients and Methods: A sample of 200 female patients was taken and a questionnaire containing close-ended questions in both Urdu and English languages was used to obtain knowledge of female patients about various health related myths.

Results: Almost 24% of patients thought that myth practitioners are trained and qualified. This belief has no boundaries even where education is concerned. The percentage of individuals believing in myths was 40.7% among the 'Matric to Bachelors' category whereas among the respondents having 'Master and Post-graduation' it was 16.66%, rest of the believers i.e. 42.64% were under matric.

Conclusion: Females in Pakistan still believe in preconceived ideas as a cause of their illness seeking treatment from mythical practices. According to our findings, alternative options of medicine are still a popular option for patients rather than opting for allopathic medicine. Cognition for allopathic treatment options is very poor and cultural influence is deeply engrained while religious knowledge is lacking, resulting in less acceptability of modern technologies.

Keywords: Health, Myths, Prevalence, Tertiary care hospital.

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INTRODUCTION

A myth is a notion that has nurtured in a cultural setup or a part of that area around certain issue¹. In everyday language the word "myth" is frequently related to imaginary tales that are believed by many however, these tales aren't credible. Mythology (Greek 'mythos' for tale of humans, and 'logos' for spoken story) is an interpretation of sacred stories, mostly believed to have curative consequences. A medical myth is mostly explained to be a distorted belief regarding issues regarding health. Most are absolutely misunderstood principles about health and illness². With time myth steadily evolved to its modern-day use as a yarn invented to deceive the ignorant. How medical myths got into being is shrouded in mystery, maybe, they are end result

of humane people looking to sympathize with the ill. The reality remains that no individual organization, network or a society is free from superstitious beliefs. "Myths" have always been an essential part of Hindu life style, lots of which passed on to us, however, thanks to the advent of Islam in the subcontinent, in addition to progresses made in technology these have softened up³. Early people due to lack of scientific knowledge used myths for explaining some natural phenomena, that involves supernatural beings or events, to explain their discoveries⁴. One of an oldest myth known of its time is that of Gilgamesh that has been one of the initial myth like tales from the human history originating from Mesopotamia, now Iraq⁵. Health related myths exist in every subculture, convincing many from each tier of society, specially encompassing lower and middle income countries to accept them as the true causation of disease. As health professionals we

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must acknowledge these practices and incorporate them in our approach to health care⁶. Patients admitted with various illnesses into a hospital with such self-perceived convictions which they refuse to part make it extraordinarily difficult for the health care providers to convince them and some time they must go along with their patient's ideals, carving their way through those myths.

PATIENTS AND METHODS

A cross-sectional survey was carried out using convenient sampling. A sample of 200 female patients was taken by convenient sampling, for which a self-structured questionnaire containing 20 close-ended questions in Urdu and English language is used to obtain knowledge of female patients about various health related myths. All patients were females admitted in our tertiary care hospital with varying diseases. We

Table: Educational status of respondents.

Education Status	Frequency	Percentage(%)
Under Primary	34	17
Primary to FA/FSc	48	24
Graduate and post graduate level	118	59
Total	200	100

made sure that a cross section from all tiers of society were involved and no special section was targeted. Patients were selected by convenient sampling and supervision was provided at the time of filling of the questionnaires. Any explanation or clarification was provided in patients own language. The answers were read back to the patients to remove any misunderstandings. The data was entered on SPSS version 17.

The main purpose of this descriptive study was to get knowledge about the use of mythical practices among our female patients admitted in Combined Military Hospital, Multan. Participants were described the purpose of study. Informed consent was taken from all respondents. The questionnaire was comprising of 20 close-ended question mostly having option "yes" and "no". Questions were designed around most commonly observed myths related to health.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out using SPSS version 17. Among various parameters that were calculated giving special consideration to educational status. Number of respondents in various age categories in our study is shown in the following graph. Out of these 17% under primary level of education 42.64% believed in various myths, while among primary to FA/FSc and graduation and above it was 40.7% and 16.66% respectively.

RESULTS

After conducting the study the results thus assessed reveal that knowledge about health is lacking among the admitted female patients. Most women of all age groups believe that the cause of their disease is dietary (44.5%) or due to change in climate (30.5%). While in this modern age still there are some women mostly from

younger and middle ages thinking that Evil Forces are the cause of their disease. Although 64% females believed in allopathy the majority of females (46%) still prefer mythical treatment options. Out of these 23% of females chose toney totkay for their treatment. And the rest go to faith healers and village wise person to consult for their illness. Almost 50% of the women chose their preferred mode of treatment assuming it to give them quick recovery the rest looked for available mode of treatment while some preferred allopathy as their first choice while a few with educated background also consult pirfaqirs, religious men or village wise person (siana) (table, figure).

Majority of the population (41%) and among 20-40 years believed that eating banana will cause cough with sputum. Same is the case with the question about effect of mother's diet on new

born health, where a majority of female population (86%) mostly from age group 20-40 years believes that it has an effect as compared to the age group 40-60 years. Which show that there is also a big percentage of young people believing in myths. People (58.5%) strongly believe that eating and drinking while on an intravenous drip can be harmful. Majority (71%) avoid taking medicine on an empty stomach thus delaying the absorption of many drugs. A vast majority (45%) think that solar eclipse if witnessed by a pregnant lady can lead to abnormalities in the child to be born. Thinking it as harmful 28% discard the most important mother's first milk which is rich source of antibodies important to enhance child's immunity thus depriving the child of

believed (51%) preventing people from most nutritious food like eggs⁷.

DISCUSSION

After conducting the study the results thus assessed reveal that knowledge about health is lacking among the admitted female patients with majority of them still preferring mythical treatment options. Even the educated population believes in supernatural powers as the cause of their illness. The issues related to health need special attention in all disciplines so that people from all spheres of life should be well aware of their disease and whom to consult in times of disease. Unawareness, lack of education and unaffordability has led them to visit quacks and consequently their poor health. Lower level of

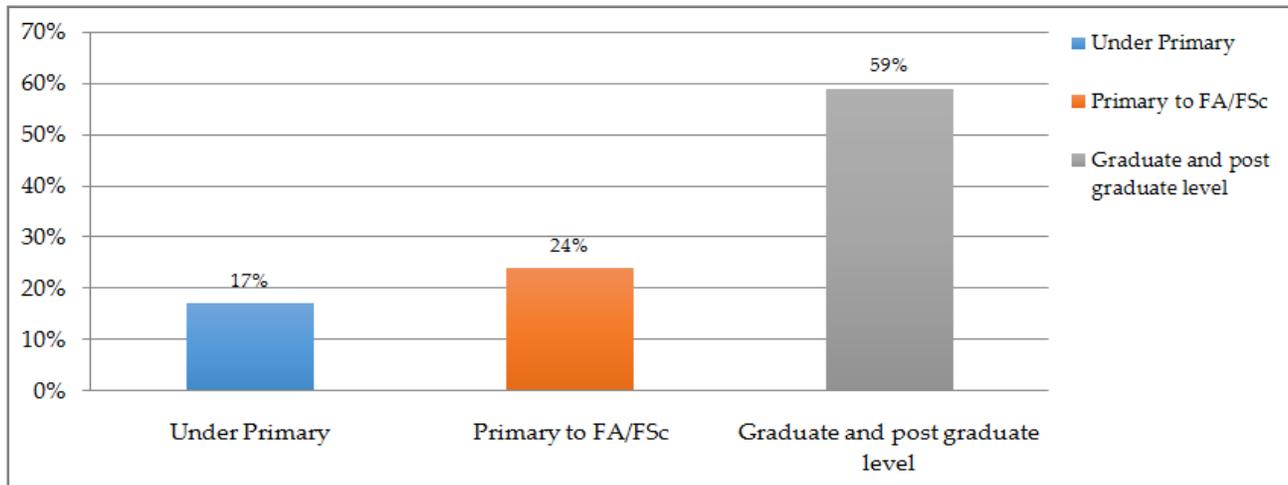


Figure: Educational status of respondents.

many nutrients important for his development. Young mothers are not allowed recreation and are stopped from watching TV, 52% of them believed that it can be hazardous for vision. A big percentage (65.5%) would not take milk and fish together thinking that it will give them whitish patches all over their skin⁸. Their belief that milk products cause stomach problems (41%) stops them from feeding even little babies with milk. Similarly many believe that mothers experience hair fall when the little angel starts to utter first words (33%). People (49%) wrap themselves in blankets to cure fever not realizing that trapping heat in body can worsen the condition. The old story of hot and cold food is still very strongly

knowledge regarding health leads community to the myths and their spread both vertically and horizontally in various tiers throughout the generations. Myths and taboos specially regarding the teeth leads many to go for home remedies, by the time the disease progresses making the teeth untreatable resulting in the only option which is extraction hence loss of the tooth. It is only possible to treat and cure ailments if community is educated and their knowledge of treatment is improved only then such myths can be removed from the society⁸. In Pakistan myths related to infertility are common, for example, woman is responsible for not having baby if couple doesn't have child⁹. Especially women are

held responsible for not having male child which neither has scientific basis nor Islamic basis. One of such prevalent myths is that if pregnant women is carrying a male child she will have "pregnancy Glow" on her face and she will not lose her figure looking smart and active while if the lady is carrying female child she will have acne on her face and will look flabby and less active, "girl steals beauty" kind of myths¹⁰. Not everyone can afford the treatment costs and consequently they visit Hakims and Quacks, most of them also lack knowledge regarding the general and dental health. The health sector of a country can be better developed through raising literacy level and socio-economic status of people. Proper education along with better employment opportunities make an individual more practical, improving the horizon about health practices. If a timely corrective action is delayed these false mythical practices will keep on spreading, resulting in deterioration of the general health of the population¹¹. None of these beliefs have any roots in Islam. In fact, mostly these are Hindu religion inspired ideas passing on as a powerful belief in Pakistan. Being the followers of such an amazing religion we should stop following these myths and transferring them from one generation to other. If we follow the teachings of Quran and our Holy Prophet Hazrat Muhammad (P.B.U.H) we can never be indulged in myths and fallacies¹².

CONCLUSION

People in Pakistan still believe in preconceived ideas as a cause of their illness seeking treatment from mythical practices. Alternative options of treatment is still popular among patients rather than opting for allopathic medicine. Cognition for allopathic treatment options is very poor and cultural influence is deeply engrained while religious knowledge is lacking, resulting in less acceptability of modern advances in technology. Not only illiteracy and low socio-economic status effect attitudes and health seeking behavior of people but such behaviors are also prevalent among the educated and well to do families. Myths like bananas cause sputum,

mothers' diet effects the baby, eating or drinking with an I/V drip, not taking medicine on an empty stomach, an eclipse effecting the unborn child, not having fish with milk and eggs being hot food are a few among many myths that have no scientific basis and such beliefs and myths needs to be discouraged.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A multi-discipline methodology has to be implemented involving every sector in and outside government, only then it will be possible to restrain these misconceptions about health and stop the mythical practices affecting the health of the society. Based on the findings, following are a few recommendations which are easy to plan and to implement by the government.

- Mass media via numerous health shows on various health issues leading to prevent hazardous effects of wrong beliefs is a best way to target the less educated. Well known media personalities or celebrities from other spheres like sports and high achievers could be involved to spread health messages.
- Using print media like advertisements in newspapers, banners and brochures for making awareness regarding myths among relatively better educated community can be of help.
- Using electronic media to make programs where myths are proven scientifically wrong. Specially covering young generation to avoid passing these false stories from one generation to next generation.
- Religious authorities should be involved and proper religious scholars from around the globe should be involved so that a correct vision into Islam can be given to the public vis-à-vis health promotion.
- School teachers can be involved in spreading the health information on general issues and hygienic practices to the masses by arranging lectures, debates and functions in school.
- In order to fight against myths and superstitions associated with health, lady health

workers can spread health education effectively among the women in rural areas.

- Establishing “health promotion committees” in the rural, less privileged areas is another way to upgrade the situation in villages thus educating people to take better care of their own health as well as of those surrounding them or are dependent on them.
- Awareness campaigns regarding health and education be launched at National, District, Tehsil and Union Council level. Health education sessions must be conducted at all levels all over the country.
- Social marketing can also be an effective way of motivating high risk people to adopt healthy behavior. Raising the knowledge of the healthy food items and removing false perceptions like those of hot and cold foods while curtailing the consumption of hazardous food items like sugar in diabetes etc, can be provided at their door steps as well as at health care units.
- Attitudes and values of the people. Medical practitioners in local health care setup can use their platforms to elevate the knowledge about health issues and remove various common misconceptions among the patients.
- Charts and poster should be displayed in waiting areas of all primary, secondary and tertiary healthcare facilities of the country

regarding different health related options.

- Professionals from Health and education sector can really help in altering the behavior, attitudes and values of the people. Medical practitioners in local health care setup can use their platforms to elevate the knowledge about health issues and remove various common misconceptions among the patients.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

This study has no conflict of interest to declare by any author.

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