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Marked By Belief: The Dark Superstition Of Child Branding

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ABSTRACT

Branding often referred to by local tribal communities as 'dhasaeba,' 'chapba,' 'lachba' or 'chenka' is the process of inflicting burns on the skin of a living being. The act of branding in children, particularly as part of a superstitious belief, is harmful and unethical. It is essential to emphasize that branding or marking children can have severe physical and psychological consequences. Such actions are generally not supported by ethical or legal standards and can lead to serious harm to the child's well-being. Two distinct cases were brought to the Pediatric Trauma and Emergency Department at the tertiary care center of Raipur: one involving a history of loss of consciousness, and the other presenting with seizures, both accompanied by multiple burn wounds over the body. Clinical forensic medicine unit consultation was sought in view of the unusual presentation of burn wounds, which upon detailed evaluation was found to be branding, a superstitious practice in villages with an intention to cure the disease.

The act of branding as part of a superstitious belief is a culturally specific practice that can vary widely across societies and communities. It is crucial to approach these topics with cultural sensitivity and understanding of human rights and child welfare. A differential diagnosis of child abuse should be considered when dealing with such cases.

Introduction

Branding often referred to by local tribal communities as 'dhasaeba,' 'chapba,' 'lachba' or 'chenka' is the process of inflicting burns on the skin of a living being. (1, 2) "Therapeutic" burns are inflicted on skin with hot iron rods as a traditional practice to treat diseases like pneumonia, jaundice, and convulsions in young children. (3) Historically, branding traces back to the Portuguese in 1440, who used it to mark slaves as a property of the King of Portugal. (4)

Gradually, this practice, intertwined with superstitious beliefs, attained a sort of religious sanctity, and is being widely used by local healers as a form of therapy. (4, 5) Heated rods cauterize wounds and boils, triggering inflammation that promotes healing through enzyme release and bacterial phagocytosis. However, the new wound can lead to serious infections if not properly cared for. This harmful practice is more prevalent among indigenous communities and people of lower socioeconomic status in developing India, and poses a risk of significant morbidity and delay in receiving

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appropriate medical care, particularly in children. (6) Section 118 of Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (Older section-324 Indian Penal Code) –Punishment for voluntarily causing hurt/grievous hurt by dangerous weapons or means, criminalize branding as this is a common practice in India's rural regions. (5) It is a cognizable and non-bailable offence, and the punishment shall extend to a term of imprisonment for not less than three years, fine of 20,000 rupees, or both in case of hurt under subsection 118(1) and under subsection (2) imprisonment for life or imprisonment of not less than one year, but it can extend to 10 years and fine.

In this article, we present two independent pediatric patients who underwent branding as a superstitious/therapeutic procedure and presented to the Pediatric Emergency Department of a tertiary care center in Raipur.

Case Report

Case 1

A 12-year-old boy who is a known case of mania with psychotic symptoms and has been on irregular medications for the same 4 months presented with complaints of decreased verbal output, decreased self-care, and stiffness of all limbs associated with altered sensorium for 5 days to the Pediatric Emergency department. During the general physical examination, the attending physician noted multiple burn injuries on the face and front of the abdomen. A Clinical Forensic Medicine Unit consultation was sought because of the aforementioned unusual burn injuries. On examination, multiple second-degree healing oval to round shaped superficial burn injuries were present over forehead, perioral region, mucosal surfaces of upper and lower lips, front of neck and front of abdomen, with size ranging from 1 cm x 0.5 cm to 0.5 cm x 0.3 cm (Fig-1). On detailed inquiry, the relatives gave a history of branding using burning incense sticks in their village by an elderly person in the family with an intention to cure the disease and to get rid of the supposedly evil spirit that has caught hold of the patient under whose influence the patient was believed to be symptomatic. The case was registered as a Medico Legal Case (MLC), and Police Intimation (PI) was sent. The patient was admitted to the Department of Psychiatry after stabilization from the Pediatric Emergency and was diagnosed with Malignant Neuroleptic Syndrome. The patient was conservatively managed and discharged, with family members counselled on the illness, its course, and the importance of adhering to treatment.

Case 2

A 3-year-old boy, a known case of Tetralogy of Fallot, was brought to the Pediatric Emergency department with complaints of right-sided focal seizures with altered

sensorium and fever for a day. He had been diagnosed with Tetralogy of Fallot approximately 6 months ago. Upon examination, multiple burn injuries were noted over the front of the neck and trunk. A Clinical Forensic Medicine Unit consultation was requested to rule out foul play. Detailed examination revealed multiple oval to round burns present over the front of the neck and trunk of size 0.5 cm x 0.5 cm. The history provided by the father was similar to that in case 1, where burning incense sticks were used to inflict burns over the body of the patient with an intention to relieve symptoms and cure the disease by an elderly person in the family. A Medico Legal Case was registered, and the police were intimated regarding it. The patient was diagnosed with decreased pulmonary blood flow and aspiration pneumonia. The patient was managed conservatively in the Intensive Care Unit and discharged after attaining hemodynamic stability.

Discussion

Our article demonstrates that, despite healthcare advancements, deep-rooted cultural beliefs still drive individuals in rural India to seek branding as a treatment method. The World Health Organization defines child abuse as: “All behaviors practiced on purpose or inadvertently by an adult, community or government resulting in harm to the child's health and physical and psychosocial development.”⁽⁷⁾ Branding is a form of child abuse, in both cases mentioned above, branding was a purposeful act intended to relieve symptoms and cure the disease.

Both cases involved male children who were branded by an elderly person in the family, which was similar to the findings derived from a cross-sectional study conducted by Harsha et al., where branding marks were frequently found in male children and 87.5% of the total cases of branding were initiated by elders in the family.⁽⁵⁾ Branding is typically performed by traditional healers who claim to have inherited the practice from their ancestors and intend to pass it on to future generations.

In an article by Adhisivam, it was mentioned that out of 144 children who were noticed to have had branding scars, 20 had a history of being branded for either pneumonia or seizure attacks, and 8 were branded as prophylaxis against pneumonia.⁽⁸⁾ This shows that pneumonia and convulsions are common illnesses among children, and branding is still being practiced. The people also strongly believed that the evil spirit came out through the branding sites and hence cured the disease, which was similar to one of the intentions behind branding in Case 1. Studies indicate that adults seek branding treatment from local healers for various conditions, including generalized myalgia, sciatica, joint pain, paralysis, facial palsy, ascites, splenomegaly, lymphadenopathy, jaundice, glaucoma, and migraines.⁽⁶⁾

In both cases mentioned above, the articles used were burning

incense sticks to inflict burns. Local tribal communities practice multiple other methods to inflict burns, which vary depending on the illness. 'Anasi' which is a popular illness among the tribal communities of Odisha, where black veins are found on the body of new born babies immediately after birth or following breastfeeding and in these cases broken black bangles are soaked in 'Mahua' oil and heated on the fire and applied over the child's black vein. 'Alachi' refers to any minor infection/wounds with pus where the traditional healers place hot raw turmeric on the wound. Some healers reported that in the case of complaints of abdominal pain among infants, they massaged the abdomen initially to bring the flow of the pain to the middle part of the abdomen and then covered the front of the abdomen with moist cotton and then applied a heated fox bone over the cotton. ⁽²⁾ The use of incense sticks for skin branding is a unique method not documented in literature. This practice, tied to religious beliefs, underscores the connection between branding and worship.

The most frequently observed branding pattern in a study conducted in rural India was the circular healed branding marks over the abdomen. New or fresh branding had 0.1 cm to 0.2 cm burn marks on face or upper limbs or back of trunk. ⁽⁵⁾ In Case 1, there was an unusual site of branding marks involving the perioral area, whereas in Case 2, branding marks were unusual over the front of the neck along with the usual sites. Both cases showed slight deviation in the presentation as well as the site of branding from the usual presentation of branding, as mentioned in other studies.

Complications.

Branding can cause severe complications due to unsterile conditions and patients' weakened immune systems. While our cases avoided such outcomes due to early hospital intervention, branding can lead to worsened illnesses, bacterial sepsis, foreign body reactions, and viral infections like hepatitis and HIV. Long-term effects include disfigurement from permanent scars, joint contractures, keloids, alopecia, and even cancer, such as Squamous Cell Carcinoma. ⁽⁶⁾

Branding, now popular in Western body art, is practiced more safely but is linked to risk-taking behaviors. Youths with body modifications are more likely to engage in substance abuse, sexual activity, smoking, marijuana use, and self-harm. ^(6,9)

Conclusion

Despite medical advances, harmful practices like branding persist in India, especially among illiterate and impoverished populations. Education through local and mass media is

vital to raise awareness about the dangers of these practices. Challenges such as inadequate healthcare, workforce shortages, poor access, and cultural barriers hinder equitable healthcare. Addressing these issues with cultural sensitivity and attention to human rights and child welfare is essential, with a differential diagnosis of child abuse considered in relevant cases.

Vigilance is necessary to diagnose air embolisms and consequently prevent complications.

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All authors participated in the study design and conception, wrote the manuscript, and approved the final draft.

Conflict of interest:

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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Not applicable

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Figure 1: Burn marks seen in Case 1



Figure 2: Burn marks on the neck in Case 2