



Prevalent Dental Myths and Taboos in India

Humans are social animals, and there is a social perspective of health from which it cannot be separated, and these cultural factors strongly influence oral health. Oral health is critical but yet an overlooked component of overall health. Oral diseases like Dental caries, periodontitis and oral cancer are global health problems. India is a developing country affluent in diversity, residing people with different ethnicity, economy and religion. This diversity is directly proportional to the myths, taboos, misconception and false beliefs[1], which has a significant impact on oral health, acting as a challenge for healthcare givers in providing complete oral care.

In Epistemology, philosophers use the term “belief” to refer to personal attitudes associated with true or false ideas and Concepts[2]. There is a belief that alum rinses help the gums to become stronger. Some people use alum for gingival massage; the feeling created by the astringent action of alum gives them a feeling that their gums have become stronger. There is also a widely held belief that chewing tobacco strengthens teeth & gums. Tobacco is supposed by many to have an antiseptic effect on the oral cavity. This belief leads to the practice of using tobacco & more often, “Mishri”, which is burnt tobacco as a dentifrice. Mishri is the most commonly used form of tobacco in women. Users enjoy the euphoric effects of nicotine present in tobacco rather than cleaning of teeth and slowly become addicted to it.

Myths are referred to as beliefs derived from narratives or stories, mainly of an unknown origin, which strongly influence the lives of individuals and their way of living, impacting their attitudes and behaviour towards seeking treatment. Taboos can be defined as subjects, actions, activities or even words that are implicitly prohibited due to social or religious customs[1]. Myths and taboos are prevalent in society due to a number of reasons, such as illiteracy, poverty, lack of awareness, anxiety, apprehension, cultural beliefs, social misperception, religious belief, lack of faith in medical/dental practice and negligence of quality medical

infrastructure[3]. Myths also spread due to the passing of personal negative Dental experiences[4].

A lot of cross-sectional surveys and questionnaire studies were performed to evaluate the prevalence of misbeliefs around the globe, especially in India, most of which are rural-based[5]. Studies by Poonam Pandya et al. (2016), Sumit Kochhar et al. (2014) and R Vignesh et al. (2012) observed that the majority of the population believes that there is no need to visit a dentist until all the permanent teeth of children erupt. Also, more than half of the population believes that spacing between upper anterior teeth is an indicator of good fortune. All these studies highlighted the belief in the Indian population that as deciduous teeth are going to be shed, so treating them is a waste of money and time. R Vignesh et al. (2012) observed that the majority of the population believed that using hard bristles for brushing (70%) and brushing with salt (56.8%) whitens the teeth. For some reason, ash and charcoal are also used. They all have a very coarse particle size which is damaging to the tooth surface and eventually leads to abrasion and sensitivity. Saumyendra V Singh et al. (2010) and Vivek S et al. (2012) highlighted the prevalent practice of finger brushing in the majority of the rural population, followed by datun or twig chewing. Gupta R et al. (2016) observed a similar brushing method in rural pregnant women. Anup Nagaraj et al. (2014), Sumit Kochhar et al. (2014) and Saumyendra V Singh et al. (2010) highlighted the myth about the removal of the upper teeth and its effect on vision. Kiran GB et al. (2016) reported that myths such as drinking alcohol reduces tooth pain, the use of twigs instead of toothbrushes is more effective, burying exfoliated teeth in cow dung for good permanent successor, and the use of tobacco or tobacco products as a remedy for tooth pain were significantly significant (P -value > 0.05) in those who had never visited a dentist. Devesh Tewari et al. (2014) showed that the majority of the population believes that home remedies are better for dental treatment and a high percentage

believe that keeping tobacco in a decayed tooth relieves its pain. Sharma et al., (2015) observed that almost all the participants believed in one or more dental myths.

According to survey conducted by FDI World Dental Federation (2017) majority of countries such as Brazil (77%), South Africa (75%), Mexico (73%), India (67%) and Canada (67%), incorrectly believed that it is important to rinse the mouth out with water after brushing. However, it is recommended not to rinse with water straight after brushing to allow maximum exposure to fluoride, which will optimise the preventive effects.

It is necessary to evaluate the cultural influence in understanding how people will and do react to ill health, pain and treatment strategies. In a developing country like India, it is a challenge to render oral health services to people where the greater part of the country's population resides in rural areas with very strong binding and influence of the myths and taboos. Rural people have greater cultural beliefs as compared to urban people. Most people have trust in spiritual therapy and alternative form of medicine and believe in the treatment of traditional local practitioners than visiting a doctor.[6]

It is crucial for dental professionals to understand the various social myths and taboos related to dentistry as they act as a hindrance towards providing complete oral care. Authorities should pay attention to the uniform distribution of healthcare facilities to bridge the gap between urban and rural cities.

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