

CULTURE AND ORAL HEALTH-A REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Health is an integral part of an individual's life and is heavily influenced by the cultural beliefs among people. Cultural beliefs affects the general as well as oral health of an individual. Cultural practices that are carried out by people has positive as well as negative impact on the quality of life. So it is important for public health workers to create awareness among people regarding the positive and negative impacts of cultural practices that are followed by them. Literature showed that many preventable diseases in the community are the result of lack of awareness among people regarding their cultural practices. By keeping in mind the cultural customs and beliefs of people proper diagnosis and treatment of the problem can be carried out by healthcare providers. This review article is an attempt to understand the cultural influence on the oral health of the people.

KEYWORDS: Culture, Beliefs, Oral health.

INTRODUCTION

Man is not only affected by the physical and biological domains but is also highly influenced by the social ambient. According to WHO (1948) health is a state of complete physical, mental and social-well being and not merely an absence of disease or infirmity so as to lead a socially and economically productive life.^[1] Social surroundings of human beings are moreover affected by the CULTURE.^[2] The word culture was derived from a Latin word Cultura which means cultivation. Culture is defined as a process of cultivation or improvement, as in agriculture or horticulture.^[3] Dutta (2007)^[4] stated that by engaging in culture-centralized attitude towards health helps in the identification of the problems that a community faces. The perceptions, shared social values and ways to know about and relate things with health are the outcomes of an individual's social surroundings. Culture is a complex concept to understand and has no widely acknowledged statement. However, it can be stated as a personal view of the society.^[5] Culture is a continuously changing concept and is not firm in nature. Culture has a great impact on the health of humans so it is important to know about the likeness as well as variance in or between the community. Different cultures have different traditions which affects the overall health of the people. Migration affects the cultural practices of

both inhabitants and the emigrants. Acculturation results when people with diverse cultural context comes in regular contact. Literature showed that various dental and health issues occurs as a result of cultural norms and practices that are followed by people since long time unescorted by any scientific argument. Various studies conducted in the past showed that culture has an impact on the people migrating from one place to another. This review is an attempt to explore the cultural impacts on the health/well-being of the people.

Characteristics of Culture

1. Organic/supra-organic: Culture is considered as organic in nature because it does not exists without humans. On the other hand, it is supra-organic as humans comes and goes but culture continues.
2. Overt/covert: It refers to materialistic/man-made objects (i.e. devices, vehicles and constructions) and non-materialistic/non-physical (speech, faith, ideas, awareness) cultures.
3. Explicit/implicit: Culture is explicit in nature when the actions can be stated directly where as when actions cannot be expressed directly is referred as implicit.
4. Stable/changing: People holds on values and customs that they think are important for their

existence and individuality. While variations comes to existence due to acculturation and adjusting to the changing environment.

5. Ideal/actual: It refers to what individuals are supposed to do and what they actually are doing.
6. Shared/learned: Culture is shared by a group of people and they share their knowledge. Although all ideas which are exchanged within people are not only cultural but are also biological in nature.
7. Symbolic: In culture symbols are widely used to grant an object or incident an absolute interpretation. Since long time symbols are used to communicate with others.

CULTURE AS AN ETIOLOGICAL FACTOR

Cultural components acts as an etiological factor of many dental problems. So it is important to have a look on all these factors during diagnosis and treatment of these problems.

1. **Dental decay:** dental decay is one of the leading dental health problems affecting the overall health of the people. Dental caries affects almost all the age-groups. Literature showed that there are many cultural beliefs that are responsible for the incident and treatment of tooth decay.
 - a) Etiology of dental caries based on the cultural beliefs: In the past various cultural factors that are thought to be responsible for the incidence of dental caries are as follows:^[6]
 - 1) Legend of worm theory: According to this theory people believed that dental caries are caused by the worms residing inside the tooth.
 - 2) Humoral theory: This theory states that imbalance within the humors (blood, yellow bile, black bile and phlegm) is responsible for dental caries.
 - 3) Vital theory: According to this theory, dental caries originates in the tooth solely like that of bone gangrene.
 - b) Religious beliefs, race-ethnicity: The awareness and ability to self-report the oral health problems were influenced by religious beliefs, race and ethnicity of the people. A study conducted on Jewish community showed that the members of the community were not able to go for dental treatment on Friday except in emergency cases having an impact on the time and money spend on dental treatment.^[7]
 - c) Dietary practices: Literature showed that tribes and people from primitive ages have coarse and fiber rich dietary patterns and reduced incidence of dental caries. On the other hand people from western countries are more prone to dental caries due to higher intake of pre-packaged foods. Scandinavian people includes foods with anti-cariogenic properties (fishes, cheese etc.) in their diet and thus have less caries prone teeth.
 - d) Dental Hygiene practices: In Hindu religion (Brahmin) use cherry wood to clean their teeth and had good oral hygiene. On the other hand, in Jain culture teeth were cleaned by using fingers and were more prone to dental caries. In villages of Kerala

people use coconut twigs and therefore, have good oral health.

- e) Geographical area: Literature showed that different geographical setting is associated with different incidence of caries among population. It has been seen that piped drinking water and paved paths showed a significant associated with the filled component of DMFT as paved paths are responsible for more accessible dental care.^[8]
- f) Home environment: It has been seen that the education of parents and premodern culture are related with the incidence of dental caries among children. Children who were deprived of their parents/part of broken homes were more prone to dental caries at age of 5 years. Impatience of mothers towards dental treatment shows association with number of unfilled teeth among children.^[9]

2. Gum diseases

Different cultural aspects having an impact on the gingival health of people are as follows:

1. **Socio-demographic status:** In general people belonging to higher socio-economic class has good periodontal status as compared to those belonging to lower socio-economic class.^[10]
2. **Race-related distinctions:** Studies showed that the chances of periodontal attachment loss differs among people with racial divisions. African people showed higher incidence of periodontal attachment loss as compared to Caucasians.^[10]
3. **Malalined teeth:** Culture is known to have a great impact on the alignment of teeth. Malalined teeth becomes more common among people of Australian continent with acculturation. As people switch from fiber-rich/rough to processed foods the morphology of the teeth changes and gradual reduction in the size of the jaws can be noticed thereby resulting in crowded teeth and narrow maxillary arch. Paleolithic period people had significantly less number of cases of overcrowded teeth because they had comparatively more wider maxillary and mandibular arches.^[11,12]
4. **Cancer of mouth:** Oral cancer is one of the preventable causes of death. Nearly 10 million new cases and 6 million people died in the world in a year. Various cultural practices acts as a etiological factors of oral cancer. Tobacco chewing is one of the most common habit followed in the name of culture which acts as an etiological factor of oral cancer. Near about 43% of deaths that are seen in cancer are caused due to consumption of tobacco, refined/processed food, alcohol and sedentary lifestyle. In different parts of the world tobacco consumption is carried out for the sake of maintaining and continuing the cultural integrity.^[13]

Reverse smoking is carried out in various districts of Andhra Pradesh responsible for the cancer of hard palate and base of tongue as it increases the temperature of oral cavity by 60⁰ celsius. In states like Assam betel nuts and

leaves are offered to the guests as a welcome gesture and to thank them for coming.

5. Hard tissue mutilation

Tribal people undergoes tooth mutilation since ages in order to distinguish them from rest of the people. The extraction of teeth is carried out by non-sterilized instruments and by non-professionals giving rise to pathologies of teeth and infections. Tooth mutilations can be non-intentional (fillings and chipping of crown) as well as intentional (habits).

6. Soft tissue mutilation

Among soft tissue mutilations body piercing is very common in South India. Piercing of tongue and lip is still very common among new generation as they think that these mutilations are a sign of bravery and fashion-symbol. Tongue piercing is known to cause fracture of teeth. Intra-oral and peri-oral jewellery are known to cause cleft-like defects.^[14]

CULTURE AS AN ICEBERG

Culture acts as an iceberg as most of it is UNDER the water of awareness. If we will try to understand the Iceberg Analogy of culture:

- Tip of the iceberg: Behaviour
- Submerged part: Values and thought patterns.

Each culture has different theories related to health and illness. Understanding Culture plays important role in successful health-related communication programme and interventions. Literature showed that age, education, gender, social status, political beliefs, religion, rules and regulations are the roadblocks to effective communication and interventions. In order to make oral health more accessible to the people it is important to consider the differences in traditions, values and behavior.

CONCLUSION

Health is the most important part of the public health system considered for conscious or instrumental reasons. Oral health of an individual is very much associated with the culture that he/she follows. Even today there are many practices that are still followed since ages. With modernization people all around the world are getting closer to each other which results in acculturation. Therefore, the public health professions should take an initiative to create awareness among people regarding the positive and negative aspects of the practices that they are following in their lives. To be a good health care provider it is important to know the cultural beliefs of a person and its impact on the oral and general health of an individual. Thus, being a health care provider it is important to have a thorough knowledge of cultural anthropology.

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