**Mutilating treatment of snake bite by a traditional healer: Heights of faith and tolerance**

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**Abstract**

Snake bites are quite common in North India and maximum cases occur in July and August. Though most snake bites are non-poisonous, the fear of death is universal. Most people rush to some local practitioner or traditional healers. We present a case where patient received mutilating therapy for a non-poisonous bite from a traditional healer and still did not have any complaints against the healer.

**Keywords**: **envenomation, venom, poisoning, toxicology**

**Introduction**

India tops in the total number of deaths caused by snake bite in any country1. Most of the deaths go unreported, as they occur before reaching hospitals. Health seeking behavior of Indian patients after snake bite is no different from other tropical countries. Most of the victims of snake bite are treated by traditional healers. These traditional heals are mostly untrained people and can produce unimaginable harm as in our patient and surprisingly people still keep full faith in such treatments. Our case shows heights of faith and tolerance in people for traditional healers.

**Case**

A 36-year-old male was admitted in medicine ward with history of snake bite on right hand 2 days back. A tourniquet was applied in the arm by the attendants. The patient went to a traditional healer, who treated him by giving innumerous superficial incisions over the forearm and hands. The incisions were given with a blade and no anesthesia was used. The patient showed immense faith and tolerance, probably because of fear of death due to snake bite. The limb was swollen as a result of tourniquet and inflammation after this incisional treatment. The patient was then brought to our hospital after two days. When we examined the patient he had no signs of systemic envenomation but his limb showed innumerous incisions on forearm, and fingers and was swollen (figure 1). The patient had already received injection tetanus toxoid in the primary health centre. We put him on appropriate antibiotics to cover any superadded infection and cellulitis. As it was not possible to differentiate local envenomation from inflammation, we gave him 60 mg of anti-snake venom at admission.

During hospitalization we tried to enquire about the address of the traditional healer to educate and prevent him from repeating this form of treatment on other patients. The patient got annoyed and did not reveal the whereabouts of traditional healer. He showed full faith in the treatment and attributed his life to the healer. On the contrary, patient sought discharge from hospital soon after that.

**Discussion**

Health seeking behavior of people depends on their educational level, availability of resources, general practices of the community, and interest taken by the health authorities and the government on a particular health issue. India has high number of snake bites and may be the topper in the list as far as the number of snake bites and deaths are concerned.1

Indian studies show that median time to reach traditional healers is 15-25 minutes, whereas time to reach hospitals is 6-7 hours in snake bites2-4. Most of the deaths occur in those who have had treatment by traditional healers2. So, it is important to educate these so called traditional healers and bring them under health programs for education and provision of first aid followed by timely referral to the nearest hospital with anti-snake venom.

Our case shows the importance of the traditional healers, because the belief and faith in their treatment was so deep despite the mutilation he received by the hands of a traditional healer. There is a need for a national program which can identify and train these traditional healers and trains them in provision of first aid and prompt referral to nearest health centers. This surely will save many lives and prevent limb loss occurring as a result of tourniquet and incisions leading to cellulitis and disseminated infections.

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**Legend**

**Figure 1.**

Forearm of the patient showing innumerous incisions given by a traditional healer for treatment of snake bite.