



## Skin Branding in Children: A Blotch in Modern Era

### KEYWORDS

Branding, Child abuse, Burns

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**ABSTRACT** Branding is a traditional practice commonly used in order to treat various illnesses in children in certain communities in India. Sadly despite presence of stringent law and mass education, branding is still practiced in some areas. We are reporting one such unfortunate case, where branding was used as therapeutic modality in neonatal hyperbilirubinemia.

**Introduction:** Branding refers to a traditional practice by which mark or symbol is burned into the skin of a living person. It is usually done with hot iron rods. In ancient era, it was used as a mode of punishment to slaves in Africa and Europe. In India, it is a method of treatment employed for several diseases such as jaundice, abdominal pain, convulsions, GBS etc. (1) Burns occurring as a result of this practice could get infected and may lead to sepsis. In addition it might raise a suspicion of physical abuse in children. (2) We recently came across a case of neonatal hyperbilirubinemia (NH) admitted in our Institution with multiple burn marks over the abdomen because of this superstitious practice.

**Case Report:** A 10 day old neonate was brought to pediatric emergency with complaints of yellowish discoloration of skin and eyes. On physical examination, baby was icteric without any signs of encephalopathy. He was also noticed to have three brown colored linear burn marks present over the anterior abdominal wall measuring 5 x 0.3 cm, 3 x 0.3cm, 6 x 0.4 cm. (Fig.1) They were crusted but had no discharge. On further probing the history, the parents told that the baby was burnt with hot iron rods to treat jaundice. The child was admitted in NICU and relevant investigations were sent. The child was managed with phototherapy. Baby was simultaneously monitored and screened for sepsis as a consequence of those burn marks. Fortunately baby didn't develop any signs of local or systemic sepsis. The baby was discharged home after 5 days, without any ill effects of branding and jaundice. Prior discharge parents were adequately counseled regarding the hazards of the malpractice and educated and motivated to prevent such practice in their neighbourhood.



Fig 1. Showing linear scar marks following branding

**Discussion** Branding as a prevention and treatment for many diseases is still a prevalent superstitious practice in many rural areas of India. The etymology of the word "BRAND" could be traced back to 12<sup>th</sup> century. (3) In Dutch "Branden" means to burn. The concept of branding was essentially to depict ownership, in particular things which had value, this practice dating back to 2000BC. In ancient era, it was being used as punishment measures across Europe and Africa. In our country branding is used as therapeutic options in many communities. (4) There were reports of branding in large scale in 1991 from rural parts of India. (1)

As per the practice a newborn with jaundice is taken to a local traditional healer who administers the brand marks on different part of body based on where he thinks is the place where the disease lurks. The most commonly used object is the hot iron rods. The children usually belong to poor, illiterate, rural family where branding is continuous tradition prevailing through many generations. (5) It is not very uncommon to find children with brand marks on different parts of body in the usual pediatric outpatient clinic. (6) In society where modern medicine is inaccessible, a large part of population seeks this form of therapy.

Our case highlights harmful malpractices like branding are still not abolished in India, despite our nation being considered as one of the largest economies in the world of late. In our case though baby didn't develop septicemia, but sepsis and mortalities are fairly common following branding. There is chance of child getting infected with HIV and Hepatitis B if instruments are not sterilized properly.

The root cause of persistence of this practice is illiteracy, superstition and lack of accessible health care. It is a criminal offence under IPC 324. Indian constitution provides immunity to our children by any 'HURT' under the Juvenile Justice Care and Protection of children Act 2000. This inhumane mode of practice should be condemned by all strata of society. The people practicing such thing should be punished under law. It is essential to provide mass education to the community regarding it.

**Conclusion:** We admitted a baby with NH with branding marks on abdomen. Fortunately baby was discharged successfully without any complication of branding as well as jaundice. Many evil and harmful malpractices like branding

is still widely prevalent in India, particularly in rural areas. Stringent punishment to the perpetrators of these heinous crimes and providing standard and affordable healthcare along with providing mass education can mitigate such diabolical practice.

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