



PAEDIATRICIANS' EXPERIENCES, ATTITUDE AND KNOWLEDGE REGARDING CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT IN INDIA

Paediatrics

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ABSTRACT

Article 3 of The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that 'the best interests of children must be the primary concern in making decisions that may affect them. All adults should do what is best for children. When adults make decisions, they should think about how their decisions will affect the children under their care.' Paediatricians are at a privileged position of effecting change in the lives of the numerous children they come in contact with, not only towards their physical but also mental, social and sexual health. This makes it their responsibility to not only identify but also take steps to help any child they feel might be suffering from abuse or neglect. Child abuse is defined as any form of physical, emotional and/or sexual mistreatment or lack of care that causes injury or emotional damage to a child or youth. This study aims to analyse the paediatricians' knowledge regarding this sensitive yet widely prevalent issue by analysing questionnaires sent to them, their attitude and experiences and factors that might be preventing them from reporting these cases, thereby preventing effective action.

KEYWORDS

Child Abuse, Child Neglect, Paediatrician

INTRODUCTION:

Article 3 of The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that 'the best interests of children must be the primary concern in making decisions that may affect them. All adults should do what is best for children. When adults make decisions, they should think about how their decisions will affect the children under their care'. Paediatricians are at a privileged position for effecting change in the lives of the numerous children they come in contact with, not only towards their physical but also mental, social and sexual health. This makes it their responsibility to not only identify but also take steps to help any child they feel might be suffering from abuse or neglect.

The International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect compared definitions of abuse from 58 countries and found some commonality in what was considered abusive. In 1999, the WHO Consultation on Child Abuse Prevention drafted the following definition "Child abuse or maltreatment constitutes all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power."²

This study aims to analyse the paediatricians' knowledge regarding this sensitive yet widely prevalent issue by analysing questionnaires sent to them, their attitude and experiences and factors that might be preventing them from reporting these cases, thereby preventing effective action.

METHOD:

A cross-sectional survey was carried out from October to December 2017. Data was collected through a self-administrated structured questionnaire offered to paediatricians working in Nagpur district of Maharashtra, India. Final sample consisted of 210 doctors who agreed to participate in the study and returned questionnaire correctly filled. Response rate was 70%.

The questionnaire consisted of sixteen questions adopted and modified from previous studies. All questions about knowledge and attitudes were formulated as a statement using multiple choices or yes/ no format.

Data was tabulated and assessed as percentages.

RESULTS:

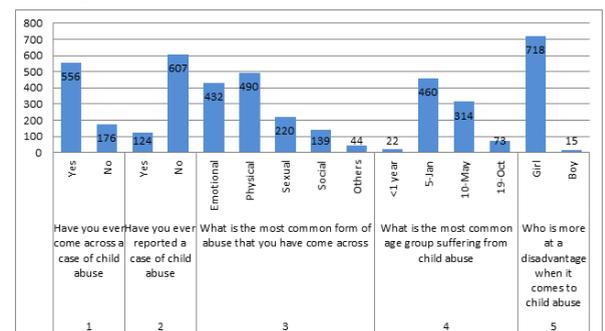
76% participants claimed to have come across cases of child abuse, whereas only 17% claimed to have reported a case of child abuse. The most common form of child abuse observed was physical (67%), followed by emotional (63%). Most common age group suffering from child abuse according to paediatricians included in this study was 1-

5yrs (63%) followed by 5-10 years (43%), whereas only 10% for 10-19 years i.e. adolescent age group. 92% seemed to think that female children are at more of a disadvantage when it comes to child abuse as compared to male children.

TABLE 1: Paediatricians' Experience Regarding Child Abuse And Neglect

S.no	Question	Options	No	%
1	Have you ever come across a case of child abuse	Yes No	556 176	76 24
2	Have you ever reported a case of child abuse	Yes No	124 607	17 83
3	What is the most common form of abuse that you have come across	Emotional Physical Sexual Social Others	432 490 220 139 44	59 67 30 19 6
4	What is the most common age group suffering from child abuse	<1 year 1-5 5-10 10-19	22 460 314 73	3 63 43 10
5	Who is more at a disadvantage when it comes to child abuse	Girl Boy	718 15	98 2

FIGURE 1: Paediatricians' Experience Regarding Child Abuse And Neglect



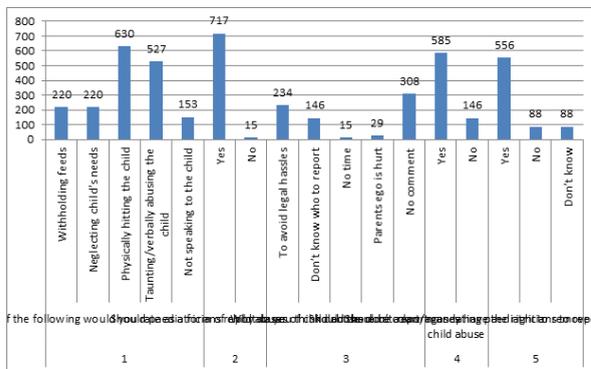
83% paediatricians seemed to think that hitting physically is a form of child abuse, followed by taunting or verbal abuse. Only 30% felt that withholding feeds or neglecting a child's needs were a form of abuse. Only 10% believed that not speaking to the child as a form of punishment is a form of abuse. 98% felt that paediatricians should report child abuse, but the majority didn't have an opinion on why they don't report. However the most probable cause for underreporting of child abuse cases was to avoid legal hassles, followed by not knowing

who to approach. 70% had no clue regarding who to approach, out of those who did know, majority felt that the police should be involved, followed by NGOs. 80% felt that there should be a law mandating paediatricians to report cases.

TABLE 2:paediatricians' Attitude Regarding Child Abuse And Neglect In India

S.No	Question	Options	No	%
1	Which of the following would you rate as a form of child abuse	Withholding feeds	220	30
		Neglecting child's needs	220	30
		Physically hitting the child	630	86
		Taunting/verbally abusing the child	527	72
		Not speaking to the child	153	21
2	Should paediatricians report cases of child abuse	Yes	717	98
		No	15	2
3	Why do you think doctors don't report cases	To avoid legal hassles	234	32
		Don't know who to report	146	20
		No time	15	2
		Parents ego is hurt	29	4
4	Should there be a law mandating paediatricians to report child abuse	Yes	585	80
		No	146	20
5	Should a court/agency have the right to remove a child from parents' care	Yes	556	76
		No	88	12
		Don't know	88	12

FIGURE 2:paediatricians' Attitude Regarding Child Abuse And Neglect In India

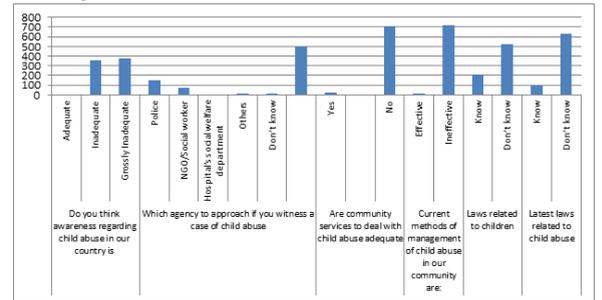


All paediatricians agree that awareness regarding child abuse in our country is inadequate.68% don't know which agency to approach if they witness child abuse. 97% agree that community services to deal with child abuse in our country are inadequate. 72% are unaware of the laws made by the government regarding child abuse.

TABLE 3:paediatricians' Knowledge Regarding Child Abuse And Neglect In India

S.no	Question	Options	No	%
1	Do you think awareness regarding child abuse in our country is	Adequate	0	0
		Inadequate	359	49
		Grossly Inadequate	373	51
2	Which agency to approach if you witness a case of child abuse	Police	146	20
		NGO/Social worker	74	10
		Hospital's social welfare department	7	1
		Others	7	1
		Don't know	498	68
3	Are community services to deal with child abuse adequate	Yes	22	3
		No	710	97
4	Current methods of management of child abuse in our community are:	Effective	15	2
		Ineffective	717	98
5	Laws related to children	Know	205	28
		Don't know	527	72
6	Latest laws related to child abuse	Know	102	14
		Don't know	630	86

FIGURE 3:paediatricians' Knowledge Regarding Child Abuse And Neglect In India



DISCUSSION:

In one of the very few similar studies conducted in India, SV Kirankumar et al reported that 64.5% medical professionals in Karnataka considered neglecting child's health and education as child maltreatment as compared to only 30% in our study.⁷

In a study conducted by B Garrusi et al in the city of Kerman, Iran in 2006 in which 200 general practitioners were given similar questionnaires, it was found that 55% did not have adequate knowledge of child maltreatment (as assessed by <75% correct response rate in the questionnaire). The study found that physicians were relatively well informed regarding the causative factors of child abuse and the physical signs and symptoms, but their knowledge of the psychiatric effects of child abuse was inadequate. 62.9 % felt that girls were more likely to suffer from child abuse, which is less compared to our study where 98% feel that females are more likely to suffer.65% physicians had seen cases of child maltreatment, but only 4.5% reported it which is less than the reporting rate in our study (17%).⁸

In 2000, EG Flaherty et al, in a study in Illinois, USA questioned 85 health care providers and found that only 8% had reported a case of child abuse for a total of 56% who had treated a case of child abuse. This reporting rate is lesser as compared to statistics found in this study of 17% reporting, but may be attributed to higher cases of child abuse cases witnessed in this study (76%).⁶

Al-Moosa A, et al. conducted a similar study in Kuwait in 2003 and found that more than 80% paediatricians did not know whether there is a legal obligation to report or which legal authorities should receive reports of suspected cases as compared to our study in which 98% felt that paediatricians should report child abuse cases and 68% did not know which agency should be approached for reporting of such cases.⁴

In a 2012 study in Saudi Arabia, conducted by Habib HS et al the overall knowledge of participants about some important aspects of child abuse and negligence was adequate, ranging between 82% and 91%, which is much higher than our study. However their knowledge about reporting cases was quite deficient (between 66% and 79%) which is still higher than our study where only 17% have reported child abuse cases.¹

CONCLUSION

Child abuse is highly prevalent in India and lack of knowledge of health care providers and lack of adequate services in our country to deal with these cases are the main reason for under-reporting and action against child abuse. Stricter laws mandating child abuse case reporting and dedicated agencies to handle these cases effectively is the need of the hour along with increase in awareness of the masses as well as health personnel.

LIMITATIONS AND SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

First, it's an area based research covering only one city of India. Secondly, it has a limited sample size. Thirdly, future research is required to assess the actual prevalence of child abuse in our country. Further studies involving a large sample size and incorporating a variety of health personnel from both urban and rural areas is required to capture the true extent of the problem of under-reporting.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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