



DELUSIONAL PARASITOSIS IN RELATION TO COVID – 19 PANDEMIC

Psychiatry

Dr. Devashish Palkar*

Third year Psychiatry resident, Government Medical College, Surat. *Corresponding Author.

Dr. Pavan Chaudhary

First year Psychiatry resident, Government Medical College, Surat.

Dr. Ritambhara Mehta

Head of the Department, Department of Psychiatry, Government Medical College, Surat.

ABSTRACT

COVID19 pandemic has caused far reaching effects on the mental health of population worldwide. It has also led to the changes in the presentation of common psychiatric conditions. Here we present a rare case of delusional parasitosis where in the patient had the delusional belief that he was infested with COVID 19 germs which were present on his skin and caused itching and distress to the patient. He tried many home based remedies before approaching dermatology department of a tertiary care hospital. He was then referred to psychiatry department for his complaints as his dermatological examination was found to be normal. Upon taking detailed history and mental status examination, the patient was diagnosed with delusional disorder somatic type according to DSM 5, which is also called delusional parasitosis. The patient was started on 2nd generation antipsychotic, Tablet Risperidone 2mg HS which was later increased to 4mg HS after 14 days. One month after starting the treatment, the patient showed remarkable improvement in form of remission of his symptoms and improvement of his quality of life.

KEYWORDS

COVID19, delusions, delusional parasitosis

INTRODUCTION

Delusional parasitosis is a type of delusional disorder somatic type in which affected individuals have the mistaken but unshakeable belief that they are infected by “bugs”: parasites, worms, bacteria, mites, or other living organisms (Wong & Koo, 2013). The spectrum of symptoms leading to the diagnosis can be quite myriad. Some individuals are quite functional and merely have the feeling that they are infested; others may experience the sensation of crawling or moving insects in their skin which is called formication; and yet others may have fixed, non-negotiable convictions about having an infestation which are the truly delusional in nature and which may interfere with their usual activities to varying degrees.

Delusional parasitosis is also known by other names like: Ekbohm's syndrome (Bellanger et al., 2009), delusory parasitosis, psychogenic parasitosis, delusional infestation, delusional ectoparasitosis, formication, chronic tactile hallucinosis, dermatophobia, parasitophobia, and cocaine bugs.

Other conditions which can mimic delusional parasitosis include: formication, delusions secondary to substance abuse such as cocaine and amphetamines, presence of another major psychiatric disorder like Schizophrenia, presence of skin disorders like scabies, and presence of nutritional deficiencies like Vitamin B12 deficiency, etc. (Wong & Koo, 2013) These differentials need to be ruled out by history, clinical and laboratory investigations before labeling a person as suffering from delusional parasitosis.

CASE REPORT

A 76 years old Hindu, married, male patient initially presented to dermatology department with complaints of tiny insects crawling all over his body causing a sensation of itching which led to significant distress and difficulty sleeping. A thorough examination was done to rule out nutritional and dermatological causes of the presentation which revealed no significant findings. However, the patient was convinced of being infested with “COVID bugs” which were crawling under his skin and causing him a great distress. The patient was the referred to Psychiatry department.

According to the patient, around 2 months ago he had accidentally touched the LPG gas cylinder of a neighbour which had been kept outside their door by the neighbour as it needed to be replaced. A couple of days later, that neighbour tested positive for COVID-19. Everyone in the neighbourhood started becoming apprehensive and started discussing whether anybody had come in contact with that person or any of his belongings. That night the patient started having itching sensation over his back and face. Initially, he tried to apply

some soothing cream locally but the itching persisted. The next morning the patient came to believe that he had been infested with COVID-19 germs as he had accidentally touched the LPG gas cylinder of the neighbour. Since then the patient was afraid that he has contracted COVID-19 germs, which are troubling him and giving him a lot of itching. To remove those germs, he would pour hot water on his body and sometimes even apply spices and condiments like clove and cinnamon over legs and hands and take bath multiple times but still this sensation of crawling of insects did not reduce with these elaborate rituals. Due to these COVID19 germs, patient had a lot of distress and sleep disturbance. Occasionally, the patient would also feel that rather than living like that it was better to die.

On history he did not report of any psychosocial stressor or use of substance. He had no past history of psychiatric illness.

Due to his fixed, firm false belief and accompanied behavioural disturbances for 2 months he was diagnosed as Delusional disorder Somatic Type as per DSM5. He was prescribed low dose second generation antipsychotic medication T. RISPERIDONE (2 mg) HS which on subsequent follow ups was increased to 4mg HS and in about a month's time the patients symptoms had completely remitted.

DISCUSSION

Since delusional parasitosis have wide array of presentation, many times patients end up visiting dermatology OPD and might end up with a wrong diagnosis. This case shows importance of consultation liaison psychiatry. Also, this case highlights how symptomatology can be coloured based on the existing social environment as in this case the pandemic of COVID 19 led to development of these symptoms and it is therefore important to recognize such symptoms and treat them appropriately at the earliest.

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 which was declared as a pandemic by WHO on 11th March 2020 has had far reaching consequences on the physical and mental health of millions of people worldwide. Some of the common psychiatric implications of COVID-19 include increased rates of stress, depression, substance use, anxiety, etc (Javed et al., 2020).

However, such rare presentations like delusional parasitosis are also a possibility and therefore it is imperative to have a good consultation liaison set up in the hospitals across the country.

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