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PAN MASALA: THE DRUG THAT HOLDS YOU IN THRALL

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HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Tharyan Tharyan, Felix Johns. "Pan Masala: The Drug that holds you in Thrall". Journal of Evidence Based Medicine and Healthcare; Volume 1, Issue 8, October 15, 2014; Page: 857-861.

ABSTRACT: Statistical data collected from doctors reveal that / Medical statistics reveal that /the number of adolescents who succumb to various types of cancer and other predisposing medical conditions resulting from habitual chewing of pan masalas is on the rise.⁽¹⁾ At the Regional Cancer Centre at Thiruvananthapuram, 23 cases of adolescents with oral cancers/cancers in the mouth/ have been reported. Many cases similar to these have been reported at various other hospitals too.

KEYWORDS: Rebuild life, health hazard and pan masala usage.

Catch 'em Young Shocking revelations

Doctors say that oral sub mucous fibrosis, a predisposing condition to cancers have been reported among children only during the last ten years or so.⁽²⁾ Dr. Gupta from Gujarat was the first to report a case of this type of cancer. It was followed by reports of children suffering from similar types of cancer from Nagpur. Meanwhile symptoms of oral cancer were reported among children in Bhopal.

Cases of oral cancer are also prevalent among young men who are habitual users of pan masalas.⁽³⁾ A recent study from Chennai indicates that oral cancers are quite common among auto-rickshaw drivers who use pan masalas regularly. These statistics are a clear indication that it was high time that legislation prohibiting the production and sale of pan masalas was mooted. Failing to do that would result in our children falling prey to fatal diseases.

Children fall unwitting preys

Premises of schools are fast becoming drug peddling centers.

Most shops stock hundreds of packets of pan masalas. Pan shops have literally become pan masala shops. It is near the premises of colleges and schools that small time traders stock the maximum number of pan masala packets.

The mixture that comes in the packet is placed on the palm and rubbed with a fore finger before it is placed between the lip and the teeth. The drug starts kicking in through the saliva. The kind that is placed under the tongue is also available. Some of them are said to contain very fine glass particles which cause fine lesions on the tongue through which the drug can directly and very quickly enter the blood stream. Its USP is that the user reaches a 'high' very quickly. They are much more addictive than the usual variety.

Even Girls Succumb to its Lure

Risk manifested in Myriad forms

Statistical data prove that the impression that only boys use pan parag is a myth.⁽⁴⁾ In ladies' hostels of colleges its use is said to be quite prevalent among girls. The number of girls

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

who place a speck of 'dust' before going to bed is certainly not negligible. They do not realize that the longer the substance remains under the tongue the more harmful it becomes. The habit may metamorphose into other more dangerous ones also.

A Lifetime of Gruesome Diseases

A habit begins just for the heck of it.

Most young people begin chewing pan masalas under peer pressure or just for fun. In a very short while children become addicted to the habit. Many pan masalas contain powerful addictive drugs.

Teachers know only too well that their wards are in the habit of using pan parag and pan masalas. But they have no precise statistics concerning the actual number of users to offer. Still, a survey conducted by Family Health Care India reveals that among children under sixteen from financially backward families who study in government schools the incidence of pan masala use is quite high.

Pan Masalas and Oral Cancers

Cancers detected among women too.

Studies conducted in the early decades of the last century have revealed that the maximum incidence of oral cancer is found in South India.⁽⁵⁾ And studies on cancer with a global perspective have corroborated this finding. Oral cancers occupy the first position among incidence rate for cancers among men while they occupy the third position in the case of women.

Obstacles in the path of legislation:

The best method is a self imposed ban.

Though there is a ban on pan masalas it is more 'honored in the breach than the observance.' It has never been enforced. This could be an indication of the inordinate and undue influence that the pan masala companies are able to exert on powers that be. Otherwise such an illegal product will not be so ubiquitous. The police turn a blind eye to it. The amount that the government gains as tax from the sale of this commodity is yet to be inquired into. Isn't it reprehensible of the government to profit by entrapping our children and youth with this fatal intoxicant?

Technically, 21 states including Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa, Uttarakhand, West Bengal etc. have banned 'Gutka', Assam, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu are considering doing the same. But how many governments can say for sure that the ban is enforced fully on ground? Aren't those who should act in this regard hiding behind smoke screens of court decrees? It is high time that parents came out for a fight to death to save our children.

Fatal toxins Found In pan Masalas

Even Small Children have become Addicts of pan masalas.

A study conducted by the Ahmedabad based Occupational Health Institute found that samples of various kinds of pan masalas available in the market contain toxic substances like Arsenic, hydrocarbons etc.⁽⁶⁾

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

In addition to these the study also proved the presence of pesticides and addictive substances. Pan Masalas produced in the Karachi plant of a major company in Pakistan is said to contain traces of psychotropic substances like Heroin. Many pan masalas become an irresistible habit because of the presence of these drugs.

Parents: Watch over Your Children

Parents should be aware of the different worlds that their children inhabit.

It is the duty of the parents to see that their children do not fall a victim to the habit of chewing pan masalas. They should never forget that their children inhabit another world between the home and the school. What do the children who start from home with their books do before they reach school? What do they eat? What do they spend money on? These are questions that parents should ask themselves. Being inordinately concerned about their studies is not enough.

Evidence suggests that children from broken families, children who lack parental guidance, children with behavioral problems, children who easily succumb to peer pressure are those who fall an easy prey to the habit.⁽⁷⁾ So parents should pay special attention to keeping all communication channels with their children open. Your busy schedule should never stop you from taking an active interest in your children. Parents should also desist from giving huge amounts as pocket money.

Even Small Children are Becoming Addicts

The need for a strong awareness programme.

Schools may conduct classes to create awareness about the tragic outcome of pan masala addiction and the dangers of drug abuse and the gravity of social problems like suicide and AIDS, film shows, skits, mimes, exhibitions and distribute pamphlets. There are many organizations like the ICPF which conduct such programmes even free of charge within their limitations. It would be good if the school authorities took steps to make use of their expertise. These programmes and classes are very effective in helping children to think for themselves and to avoid bad habits. Many harmless items like Passpass, Chocco Maza and Pan Pasand Toffee etc. are available in the market. But children who make a habit of consuming these later chances of are greater. It is easy enough to convince children about the undesirable effects of pan masalas. They may be told about children who developed cancer due to the usage of these. One may even tell one should also meet with the teachers periodically and talk. Teachers are in a better position to identify such problems first.⁽⁸⁾

Even though TamilNadu banned the use pan masalas two years ago, they are easily available in all way side shops. They used to be sold openly but now they are being under the counter secretly. They are never bothered by police raids or other hullabaloo. Still the shop keepers don't openly flout the law by selling openly. The number of people who regularly consume pan masalas is steadily increasing. The ban or the awareness programme does not seem to affect them. Even small children are becoming the addicts of pan masalas. The habit also leads to mental problems.

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Children start on the habit under peer pressure or just for fun. After a couple days' use it becomes a habit. Slowly one becomes its slave. Thus hundreds of young men and children fall prey to the habit.⁽⁹⁾

Not only in pan parag but the pans prepared at way side pan shops are also alleged to contain intoxicants. A whole lot of people become regular users just because of that. The pan mixture has not been banned. No scientific exam of it has ever taken place. Only those who have tasted it know the extent of the kick it provides. Even though smoking has been prohibited in public place in imitation of Kerala, people smoke with impunity in publicly and the police hardly ever pay any attention. Smoking ban has gone the same way that pan parag has gone. Smoking is on the decrease due to awareness campaigns and the ban on smoking in public places but the consumption of alcohol and drugs and pan masalas is increasing.

A 12 years old boy called Arun was brought for treatment. He had been disinclined to study for a couple of months. Depression, anger and insomnia had been troubling him. He was the only child. His father was gainfully employed abroad. The child and his mother had been living on their own. The breakup of his parent's marriage and the quarrels between them deeply disturbed the child. He did not receive the support that he needed at home. All that he had was the questionable support of a couple of class mates.

Once he tasted the pan masala that he received from his friend. In the course of time he became hooked on it. More examination revealed lesions which are precursors of oral cancer in his mouth. How many parents devote themselves to get to know their children and share love and care?



pan masala photo

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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Date of Submission: 02/06/2014.
Date of Peer Review: 03/06/2014.
Date of Acceptance: 24/07/2014.
Date of Publishing: 06/10/2014.