

## DELUSION OF PARASITOSIS

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Delusion of parasitosis is a type of mono-symptomatic hypochondriacal psychosis common in elderly females whose response to drug therapy, usually Pimozide, is variable. Two male patients presented with the delusion of their skin being infested with minute insects. One of them experienced presence of the insects inside the body cavities and spreading all over the body. They were treated satisfactorily with the neuroleptic drug, trifluoperazine.

**Key words :** Delusion of parasitosis, Treatment, Trifluoperazine.

Delusion of parasitosis (Parasitophobia, Ekblom's syndrome) is an unusual psychiatric syndrome in which the patient has a delusion that his or her body is infested with parasites.<sup>1</sup> They generally consult a dermatologist, thereby effectively rejecting the possibility of a mental disease.<sup>2</sup> Such patients require early detection and proper psychiatric management. No amount of explanation or investigations will convince them that the insects are not present.<sup>3</sup> Prescription of topical caustics, insecticides to appease the patient only strengthen the delusional conviction. The following two cases highlight the clinically interesting nature of the symptoms and effectiveness of proper psychiatric drug treatment.

### Case Reports

#### Case 1

A 50-year-old illiterate male reported to the dermatologist with an incapacitating itching all over his body since the past 6 months. He attributed this problem to the presence of hundreds of small pin-head sized, round and black insects which had initially taken root in his head and later spread all over his body by crawling just beneath the skin. He demonstrated that he can kill these insects by crushing them under his fingers, and it was observed that the

sound of his knuckles-breaking was interpreted by the patient as that due to the insects getting crushed. Examination by the psychiatrist showed no other thought, perceptual or mood disturbance. There was no history of drug abuse. Several marks of excoriations attributable to the intense scratching, could be seen all over his body. The patient was started on oral trifluoperazine 10 mg per day and after two months of treatment he showed improvement to the extent that there was marked reduction in itching with the symptoms being restricted to the scalp. Though the delusion persisted, its sharpness was less and the patient was able to attend to his work.

#### Case 2

A 60-year-old farmer was seen by the dermatologist for itching all over the body since 1 year. He reported that several fly-like insects are present in his abdominal cavity and are spreading all over his body and coming out through the body orifices such as the nostrils, ears, mouth and the anus. He felt that there were only 2 or 3 insects to begin with, but as they mated, laid eggs and proliferated, they began to spread. Treatment with native medication and local skin applications were of no avail. Psychiatric examination established the presence of this isolated delusion of infestation without any other psychiatric disorder. He was treated with 15 mg oral trifluoperazine per day for 2 months. At the end of 2 months, the patient was able to return to his work and he harboured only

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simple ideas of infestation about which he could be easily reassured.

### Comments

Delusion of parasitosis is a mono-symptomatic psychotic condition seen above 40 years of age, usually in women.<sup>3</sup> The delusion of being infested with parasites can sometimes be a symptom of other psychiatric disorders like major depression, schizophrenia or organic brain syndromes, where other symptoms of the primary disorder will also be present. Formication, a sense of insects crawling all over the body, is a hallucinatory phenomenon seen in cocaine addicts. Sometimes, similar symptoms can be seen in deficiency states like pellagra.<sup>3</sup> In some cases, the symptom of parasitophobia could be of the nature of an obsessional anxiety not amounting to a delusion.<sup>4</sup> Results of treatment of the mono-symptomatic psychotic patient with anti-psychotic neuroleptic drugs are reported to be dismal.<sup>3</sup> However satisfactory response with pimozide,<sup>5</sup> or haloperidol<sup>2</sup> have been observed. The two cases reported here are of the nature of a mono-symptomatic hypochondriacal delusional psychosis presenting as delusion of parasitosis as described by Munro.<sup>5</sup> Response to trifluoperazine seen in these cases has not featured in previous case reports and this is the first report on the effective use of this

drug. The cases demonstrate the need for early detection of such cases by the dermatologist and proper psychiatric drug therapy. Failure to detect these cases in the early stages and prescribing dermatological treatment would make the delusional belief firmer, making psychiatric intervention difficult at later stages.

### References

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Drug used : Trifluoperazine hydrochloride : *Eskazine* (Smith Kline and French).