DELIBERATE SELF-POISONING AS A PUBLIC HEALTH CONCERN

INTRODUCTION

Deliberate self-poisoning (DSH) or suicide is an impulsive response to emotional misbalance, wherein the victim experiencing the state believes in self-destruction as a solution to the problems faced. Over 800,000 people die due to suicide every year, and there are many more who attempt suicide. Hence, many millions of people are affected or experience suicide bereavement every year. Suicide occurs throughout the life span and was the second leading cause of death among 15-29 years old globally in 2012. Suicide is a global phenomenon in all regions of the world; in fact, 75% of global suicide occurred in low- and middle-income countries in 2012. Suicide accounted for 1.4% of all deaths worldwide, making it the 15th leading cause of death [1]. Deliberate self-poisoning is the leading method of attempted suicide and has lead to increased emergency department admissions. Individuals who have inflicted harm can be categorized as ones with failed attempt who wanted to die and others with non-fatal intentions to draw attention or threaten.

Moreover, in developing countries, the epidemiological records of these attempts are unavailable or distorted. Different age and gender patterns of self-harm available possibly explain that young adults particularly are more likely to take impulsive measures, and as these are unplanned, agents used are which readily available. In China and Sri Lanka, some of the highest rates are seen in young adults with a varied male:female ratio.

Possible strategies to reduce this need detailed epidemiological data of risk population, circumstances, and toxic substances. Currently, in India, lack of updated information, a few established poison centers and limited national surveillance have become a hurdle in implementing prevention and targeted intervention programs. This study characterizes poisoning with regard to demographic factors (i.e., age, sex, and residence), common toxic agents used, and their case fatality rates as well as the overall mortality rate of self-poisoning in Pune.

Pune is a district in the state of Maharashtra in India. According to the most recent census in 2011, the total population was 9.4 million making it the fourth most populous district in India. Known as the Oxford of the East with prestigious academic and research institutions attracts a young crowd. The agricultural diversity along with its rapidly expanding industrial hub has provided easy accessibility to harmful chemicals.

METHODS

Study area

The study was conducted in Pune district of Maharashtra, which resides a total population of 9.4 million inhabitants with a male:female ratio of...
1.1.1. It forms a part of the tropical monsoon land and therefore shows a significant seasonal variation in temperature and rainfall.

The Pune city resides many multispecialty hospitals. The government hospital, a 380-bedded multispecialty hospital, is located in Pimpri–Chinchwad which engulfs a wide area of surrounding suburban and industrial areas such as Aundh, Bhosari, Nigdi, and villages such as Moshi, Chikhali, and Dehu. The private teaching hospital is a 900-bedded hospital with hi-tech special superficies. It is located in inner suburbs of Pune which includes areas such as Katraj, Ambegaon, Vadgaon, and Parvati Hill. These are the industrial and agricultural areas where a high number of chemical or pesticide poisoning can be observed.

Population and sampling

The study was cross-sectional and made use of retrospective extraction of data from records available at the government and private teaching hospitals, respectively. All cases of poisoning available in the medical record departments were included in the study.

Data collection and extraction

The records were collected from the Medical Record Department of the respective hospitals. The data collection period was from January 2014 to December 2015. The cases were reviewed for gender, age, route of poisoning, seasonal variation, and agents. Poisonous agents were described and grouped in accordance with the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems 10th Revision.

Statistical analysis

Data were collected in predefined forms. Chi-square test was used to determine the association between the variables. p<0.05 was used to determine significance. The relative risk or risk ratio (RR), its standard error, and 95% confidence interval are calculated according to Altman, 1991.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In 2 years, the total numbers of cases of intentional poisoning reported were 539. Marital status and occupational background were not included in the study due to inappropriateness and unavailability of data in many case files. The sex, age, reason of poisoning, route of poisoning, seasonal variation, and agents involved in poisoning are according to the records available.

The results from this study revealed that most of the cases reported to the emergency department for suicide attempt by self-poisoning were males, a finding that is contrary to the previous studies where female outnumbered male [6-10]. The male:female ratio was 1:0.86 and significant (p<0.01). The finding consistent with the literature is that most of the cases reported represented persons in the age range 20-35 years [67.7%] [11] followed by 13-19 years [19.1%]. This supports research that indicates that adolescents and young people are most at risk for suicide attempts [6,7,9]. Moreover, all other age categories showed high self-poisoning tendency in male except in 13-19 age category where female reported nearly twice admissions due to self-harm (Tables 1 and 2).

The patients who self-poisoned had consumed a combination of harmful chemicals and even with mixed alcohol. Household and agricultural agents were maximum consumed (71.8%), and this is similar to the findings by other studies performed in India [2,12-14]. Phenol-containing agents reported 108 cases followed by rodenticides, organophosphates and carbamates with 81 and 72 cases, respectively. Kerosene, corrosive acids, alcohol, detergents, organochlorine, and paraquat cases were also seen. Furthermore, drug overdose was also reported with 20.8% incidence. Sedative hypnotics and psychotropics were used and also certain analgesics, antibiotics, and topical lotions.

Most cases had consumed unknown combination of drugs as well. 40 cases of unknown poison consumption were also treated. Agents of poisoning showed a similar trend in all age categories with a maximum consumption of household agents followed by drugs for DSH (Tables 1 and 3).

Nearly 79.5% of cases were mild and symptoms improved in maximum, i.e., 82.7% of patients. About 3.5% of cases were severe, and 2.0% of mortality reported. Furthermore, 14.5% of cases absconded or discharged against medical advice. Furthermore, out of the 15 death cases, 14 were male and maximum in the age category of 20-35. Time of hospitalization of these death cases was considerably maximum during 12 pm to 6 pm and highest during the summer season. Agents responsible for death were organophosphates (6 cases), organochlorine benzene hexachloride (BHC), BHC (2 cases), BHC with alcohol (4 cases), alcohol (2 cases), and alprazolam (1 case) (Tables 1 and 4).

The different psychological factors which influenced suicidal tendencies in the admitted poisoning cases were recorded. The reasons were unavailable for few intentional poisoning cases. A clinical impression of psychosocial factors as a risk factor for distal sensory polyneuropathy can be established by calculating RR. RR 4.76 with 95% confidence interval (CI) 4.0799-5.5721, significance p=0.001, NNT (Harm) 1.265 with 95% CI 1.331-1.206.

Four main factors were interpersonal conflict, stress, dissatisfaction, and others. Interpersonal conflict was the chief reason and this is consistent with the literature that interpersonal conflict is among the top-stated reasons for suicide attempts, especially among young people [15-17]. The conflicts included fights and arguments with family members, friends, and even colleagues. Most victims stated the reason as domestic dispute and thus a higher ratio of women who involved in these disputes attempted poisoning. In addition, the age group of 20-35 showed maximum poisoning followed by teenagers due to interpersonal conflict. Most of the cases were mild, and choices of agents were mainly household agents followed by drugs. Maximum patients showed improvement in their symptoms, and also 3 death cases were discharged against medical advice.

### Table 1: Patient characteristics of deliberate self-harm cases

| Characteristics                  | Intentional N=539 (%) |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Sex                              |                       |
| Male                             | 289 (53.6)            |
| Female                           | 250 (46.4)            |
| Age                              |                       |
| 13-19                            | 103 (19.1)            |
| 20-35                            | 365 (67.7)            |
| >55                              | 58 (10.8)             |
| Season                           |                       |
| Summer                           | 185 (34.3)            |
| Rainy                            | 194 (36.0)            |
| Winter                           | 160 (29.7)            |
| Severity                         |                       |
| Mild                             | 409 (75.9)            |
| Moderate                         | 111 (20.6)            |
| Severe                           | 19 (3.5)              |
| Agent involved                   |                       |
| Household and agricultural products | 387 (71.9)        |
| Drugs                            | 112 (20.8)            |
| Unspecified                      | 40 (7.4)              |
| Outcome                          |                       |
| Symptom improved                 | 446 (82.7)            |
| DAMA                             | 78 (14.5)             |
| Death                            | 15 (2.8)              |
| Psychosocial factor              |                       |
| Interpersonal conflict           | 217 (52.5)            |
| Stress                           | 126 (30.4)            |
| Dissatisfaction                  | 25 (6.0)              |
| Others                           | 46 (11.1)             |

DAMA: Discharge against medical advice
Due to suicide influenced by domestic disputes. Stress was the second highest factor influencing suicides. These patients faced stress due to examinations, tension at home, responsibilities, and burden of loan payment or debt. Dissatisfaction was the other reason with feelings such as disappointment, failed expectations, and loss of hope due to events in personal and professional life leading to self-poisoning. Other factors such as chronic health problems and alcohol influence also influenced psychology of individuals who felt helpless and committed suicide. History of a psychiatric illness was not a predominant characteristic of patients who attempted suicide, and this is an interesting finding as extensive research has shown that a mental disorder is strongly associated with suicidal ideation and attempts [6,7,9,18]. However, there is a possibility that this is an underrepresentation as some of these patients may, in fact, have a psychiatric illness that has been undiagnosed up to the point of their ER visit. Overall female and young adults of age 20-35 were reported to be most affected by psychosocial factors (Table 5).

Limitations

The study was conducted retrospectively, and prospective study should be conducted to observe and manage patient clinically. Proper maintenance of records was not found in the government setting, and multispecialty care was not provided. Some case reports were torn while others were missing. Patient details such as background, marital status, location of stay, and time of exposure were not found in majority case report. Cases referred from other hospitals lacked proper patient history. The time of exposure and admission was not properly recorded.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight the trending characteristics of persons who have attempted suicide by self-poisoning. It provides mostly consistent data to those presented by numerous global researchers and indicates a psychosocial pattern as well as for suicide risk factors. The psychosocial influences are a dominant risk factor and can be used to predict and avoid suicidal poisonings. Increased intentional poisoning in teens and adults emphasizes on importance of counseling and awareness about depression and stress affecting the major strata of the society which increases suicidal tendencies [19]. The pattern suggests that if this issue left unattended can be a burden on the health economy. Burden of self-poisoning brought to casualty demands

| Table 2: Age-wise distribution of DSP cases |
|------------------------------------------|
| Characteristics | Age in years | 13-19 (N=103) | 20-35 (N=365) | 36-55 (N=58) | >55 (N=13) | p |
|------------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|---|
| Sex | Male | 32 | 202 | 44 | 11 | <0.01 |
| | Female | 71 | 163 | 14 | 2 | |
| Agent involved | Household and agricultural products | 72 | 262 | 47 | 6 | 0.22 |
| | Drugs | 25 | 75 | 7 | 5 | |
| | Unspecified | 6 | 28 | 4 | 2 | |
| Severity | Mild | 94 | 279 | 34 | 0 | <0.01 |
| | Moderate | 9 | 77 | 20 | 5 | |
| | Severe | 0 | 9 | 4 | 8 | |
| Outcome | Symptom improved | 92 | 300 | 48 | 7 | <0.01 |
| | DAMA | 11 | 59 | 6 | 2 | |

DSP: Distal sensory polyneuropathy. DAMA: Discharge against medical advice

| Table 3: Classification of poison agents according to ICD-10 |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| Type of poison | ICD-10 | Number of cases |
|----------------|--------|-----------------|
| Organophosphates and carbamates | T60.0 | 72 |
| Other insecticides | T60.2 | 33 |
| Rodenticides | T60.4 | 81 |
| Other pesticides | T60.8,9 | 3 |
| Kerosene | T52.0 | 12 |
| Phenol and related agents | T54.0 | 108 |
| Corrosives acids and alkali | T54.1/2/3/9 | 9 |
| Other organic solvents | T52.8 | 3 |
| Alcohol | T51 | 54 |
| Soap and detergent | T55 | 3 |
| Organochlorine | T53 | 6 |
| Herbicides-pararquat | T60.3 | 12 |
| Antibiotic | T36 | 16 |
| Non-opioid analgesics and antipyretics | T39 | 8 |
| Antiepileptic, sedative hypnotics | T42 | 32 |
| Psychotropic | T43 | 16 |
| Cardiac-stimulant glycoside | T46.0 | 8 |
| Vaccines and unknown medication | T50 | 32 |
| Topical lotion | T49 | 8 |

| Table 4: Patient characteristics of DSH mortality |
|--------------------------------------------------|
| Characteristics | Number of cases |
|------------------|-----------------|
| Death | Sex | Male | 14 |
| | Female | 1 |
| | Age | 13-19 | 1 |
| | 20-35 | 6 |
| | 36-55 | 4 |
| | >55 | 4 |
| | TOH | 6 am-12 pm | 3 |
| | 12 pm-6 pm | 8 |
| | 6 pm-12 am | 5 |
| | Season | Summer | 5 |
| | | Rainy | 6 |
| | | Winter | 4 |
| | Agent involved | OPP | 6 |
| | | BHC | 6 |
| | | Alcohol | 4 |
| | | Alprazolam | 1 |

DSH: Deliberate self-harm, TOH: Time of hospitalization, BHC: Benzene hexachloride

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strategies for identification and rational management providing optimal outcomes.

Future directions
Very few studies on self-poisoning targeted cases have been done in the country with over 1.2 billion population. More studies focusing on epidemiology should be encouraged in different hospital settings and geographical areas to study the pattern of poisoning, its morbidity, and mortality. A long-term prospective study is needed in case of poisoning for understanding the clinical pattern and management techniques which can help in intervention for a better outcome. An urgent need to implement preventative and intervention strategies to combat suicide needs national emphasis and awareness measures. It should also involve accurate and appropriate assessments of those people at risk.

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