DETERMINANTS OF SUICIDAL ATTEMPTS OF WIVES OF SUBSTANCE ABUSERS

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ABSTRACT

One hundred and fiftyseven suicide attempters who were the wives of substance abusers were interviewed with the help of a self innovated proforma that was designed to explore the causative factors for their suicidal behaviour. These subjects were selected from the intensive Medical Care Unit of Government Stanley Hospital, Chennai. Some of the family and personal problems encountered by them that were attributable to their husbands' behaviour, such as disturbed relationship with the relatives (84.7%), being manhandled by their husbands (79.5%), financial problems (76.4%) and deprivation of emotional support and love (51%), were scarcely different from those noted in other reports on attempted suicide.

Nonetheless, besides the fighting behaviour of their spouses with others (58.6%), the influence of the symptoms of delusional jealousy (24.8%) and suicidal ideas (14.0%) manifested by their husbands as driving forces for their suicidal behaviour might be of specific relevance to this group of suicide attempters. The cultural influence on the behaviour of our women in response to these psychiatric symptoms of their husbands has been highlighted.

Key words: Suicide, women, substances, abuse, culture

Suicidal behaviour is one of the faulty problem solving strategies displayed by women as a reaction to the stress caused by the substances abusing husbands. Elsewhere, it has been reported that among the female suicides 12.5% had resorted to self destruction as a result of maladjustment with husbands who were substance abusers (Ponnudurai and Jayakar, 1980). Sathyanarayana Rao and Kuruvilla (1992), based on a self report by the wives of alcoholics noted that, discord, avoidance, indulgence and fearful withdrawal were the common coping behaviours. Further, marital breakdown, taking special action, assertion and sexual withdrawal were the less used coping behaviours, they observed. Avoidance was the most commonly endorsed coping behaviour according to Chandrasekaran and Chitrakala (1998). Studies by Orford et al. (1976) showed a strong correlation between various coping behaviours and alcoholic symptoms, hardships, job status, wife's age and neuroticism score.

According to James and Goldman (1971), wives tend to report progressive increase in all types of coping behaviour depending on the intensity and frequency of alcoholic episodes. When such coping mechanisms fail, low frustration tolerance might lead to suicidal behaviour. Since the causative factors in this subgroup of suicide attempters might be a little different from the other groups, it is worthwhile to exclusively assess the determinants of the suicidal behaviour of the wives of substance abusers. Such an investigation will also be helpful in formulating the suicide prevention strategies for this group of women.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Women suicide attempters admitted in the
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#### TABLE

**PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED BY SUICIDE ATTEMPTERS**

| Causative Factors attributable to Husbands' behaviour | No. of Wives in Whom it had been a Factor (N=157) | Total No. of Wives in whom it had been a Factor | Total No. of wives in whom it had been the most important factor | Percentage of wives in whom it had been the most important factor |
|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Wives of Alcohol Abusers (N=132)                  | Wives of Poly Substance Abusers (N=25)        |                                               |                                                               |                                                               |
| Disturbed Relationship with Relatives             | 111 (84.1)                                   | 133 (84.7)                                   | 19                                                           | 14.3                                                          |
| Husband Neglects house work                       | 52 (39.4)                                    | 70 (44.6)                                    | 1                                                            | 1.4                                                           |
| Development of emotional problems such as worries and anxiety in the patient | 32 (24.2)                                   | 41 (26.1)                                    | 4                                                            | 9.8                                                           |
| Deprived of emotional support and love from the husband | 66 (50)                                      | 80 (51)                                      | 7                                                            | 8.75                                                          |
| Being beaten often by the husbands                | 104 (78.8)                                   | 125 (79.6)                                   | 27                                                           | 21.6                                                          |
| Financial problems                                | 34 (25.8)                                    | 41 (26.1)                                    | 2                                                            | 4.9                                                           |
| Husbands illicit contacts                         | 104 (78.8)                                   | 121 (77.1)                                   | 41                                                           | 33.9                                                          |
| Fighting with others                              | 31 (23.5)                                    | 41 (26.1)                                    | 16                                                           | 39.02                                                         |
| Arrest by Police                                  | 72 (54.6)                                    | 92 (58.6)                                    | 4                                                            | 4.4                                                           |
| Irregular to work                                 | 28 (21.2)                                    | 40 (25.48)                                   | 5                                                            | 12.5                                                          |
| Suspension from Job                               | 77 (58.3)                                    | 93 (59.2)                                    | 1                                                            | 1.1                                                           |
| Loss of Job                                       | 17 (12.9)                                    | 20 (12.74)                                   | 0                                                            | -                                                             |
| Factors Attributable to the physical & Psychiatric symptoms in the husbands | 23 (17.4)                                   | 31 (19.75)                                   | 0                                                            | -                                                             |
| Hospitalisation for Physical Problems             | 15 (11.4)                                    | 19 (12.1)                                    | 0                                                            | -                                                             |
| organs affected                                   | 34 (25.8)                                    | 41 (26.1)                                    | 0                                                            | -                                                             |
| Tremors of Hands                                  | 44 (33.3)                                    | 52 (33.12)                                   | 0                                                            | -                                                             |
| Suicidal ideas/Attempts                           | 19 (14.4)                                    | 22 (14)                                      | 0                                                            | -                                                             |
| Hallucinations                                   | 7 (5.3)                                      | 9 (5.7)                                      | 0                                                            | -                                                             |
| Delusional Jealousy                              | 32 (24.2)                                    | 39 (24.8)                                    | 25                                                           | 64.1                                                          |
| Confusional State                                 | 1 (0.8)                                      | 4 (2.6)                                      | 0                                                            | -                                                             |
| Other factors                                    | 4 (3)                                        | 5 (3.2)                                      | 0                                                            | -                                                             |

Figures in Parenthesis indicate Percentage

Intensive Medical Care Unit of Government Stanley Hospital, Chennai, from April 1997 to March 1998, whose husbands were reported to be substance abusers entered into this study. Only the subjects whose spouses met with the DSM IV Criteria (American Psychiatric Association, 1994), either for substance dependence or substance abuse were included in this study. Patients who died soon after admission or discharged against medical advice...
before an interview could be conducted could not be taken up for this study. After exclusion of uncooperative patients 157 subjects entered into this project.

The patients were interviewed by two of the authors (T.S.U. and S.R.), after adequate resuscitation and improvement in their general condition. An attempt was also made to re-interview some of the patients chosen at random. The same questions were posed by the third interviewer (R.P.) to check the reliability of the data. The responses were identical and the data were found to be reliable. The information was elicited with the help of a self-invented questionnaire that was designed by incorporating the items of questions found in the Michigan alcoholism screening test (Selzer, 1971), with a few modifications and additions. These questions were designed to tap the maladaptive behaviour of their husbands which led to the impairment in the family, occupational, and social spheres. Questions were also included to elicit the problems posed by their husbands due to their physical condition, medical complications and psychiatric symptoms that included mood disturbances, perceptual abnormalities, delusions, disorientation, and memory lapses. The presence of these psychiatric symptoms in the husbands of the patients were ascertained only by the history furnished by the patients. Such a history was considered more reliable than interviewing the husbands in person, in view of the possibility of denial and non-cooperation from the spouses of suicide attempters. Specific enquiry was also addressed to explore whether the attributed causative factor was also the most important factor or it was only one of the factors.

RESULTS

Noteworthy among the family and domestic problems was the disturbed relationship with the relatives in 84.7% of the wives of substance abusers. Other notable disturbing factors for many were, being manhandled by their husbands (79.6%) and financial problems (77.1%). Deprivation of emotional support and love (51%), and, negligence of household works (44.6%) were also stressful factors for some.

The disharmony created by the substance abusers in the social sphere by way of fighting with others has been a driving force for some women (58.6%) and this factor was more prominent in the wives of polysubstance abusers (80%). Husband's irregular attendance to work and suspension from job had led to the self-harming behaviour in 59.2% and 12.74% of their spouses respectively.

Interestingly, among the psychiatric symptoms manifested by the substance abusers, one of that have driven a substantial number of women to self-harming behaviour was delusional jealousy (24.8%) followed by suicidal ideas (14.0%). Further, the husbands' ailments due to the damage of internal organs such as liver and stomach had been a traumatic factor for 26% of womenfolk.

If, certain factors have been pointed out by the patients as also the most important driving force for suicidal behaviour, those factors can be assumed as potentially more dangerous than other factors. In this investigation, among the family problems that were responsible for the suicidal behaviour, husbands' illicit contact, financial problems, and, being beaten often were also identified as the most important factor in substantial number of patients (39.02%, 33.9% and 21.6%). Likewise, among the psychiatric symptoms harboured by the husbands, delusional jealousy has been identified by many patients as also the most important driving force (64.1%) (see Table).

DISCUSSION

Wives of substance abusers run a high risk for suicide (Ponnudurai and Jayakar, 1980; Ponnudurai et al., 1986). In fact, studies which cite factors such as marital disharmony and frequent quarrels with spouses as determinants of suicidal behaviour in women could have ultimately unfolded the abuse of substances by their husbands in
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A substantial proportion of cases if only these studies had focussed on that aspect also. Although some of the causative factors noted in this investigation such as domestic and family problems, and financial stress appear to be similar to those noted in other studies (Shukla et al., 1990; Banerjee et al., 1990; Jain et al., 1999), where such a subrouping of sample was not attempted, a few factors may still be considered as specific to this subgroup of suicide attempters. More specifically, the suicidal behaviour attributed to the psychiatric symptoms such as delusional jealousy and suicidal ideas manifested by the substance abusers seem to be more important to this group of suicide attempters. Furthermore, deprivation of emotional support from the husbands, avoidance of household responsibilities by the substance abusers and being manhandled by them, have also assumed important roles in inducing the suicidal behaviour in women. Infact, such a behaviour of their husbands might be directly or indirectly a sequela of the already outlined psychiatric symptoms. Hence, early detection of these symptoms in the substance abusers and institution of appropriate management strategies might act as a deterrent in such suicide attempters.

In this context, it is worth highlighting the reaction of our Indian women to the symptom of delusional jealousy exhibited by their spouses. Various types of emotional reactions of women, in response to the suspicion of their fidelity by their husbands is universal. Nonetheless, in this study the self harming behaviour of some women reflects the type of emotional and behavioural reaction of our Indian women on being suspected of their chastity by none other than their own husbands. This may also reflect the significance and value that our Indian culture imposes on the chastity of our women. Likewise, the suicidal behaviour of their wives probably indicates our Indian Women's desire to die either before their husbands' death or along with them. The cultural influence on such a belief and desire is evidenced from the wide prevalence of "Sati" in ancient India, a practice in which women joined their husbands in their funeral pyre that has been vividly outlined by several investigators (Quoted by Dutta, 1988). Nevertheless, paucity of literature in this regard across the different cultures in the world prohibits the authors to attribute such behaviours exclusively to Indian culture.

Future research on suicide attempters should focus on the different homogenous subgroups of patients sharing particular problems, and profiles. This will help to clearly delineate the determinants and understand the psychological processes involved in suicidal behaviours of the various types of suicidees.

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