

SUICIDE ATTEMPT IN A TEN YEAR OLD BOY: A CASE REPORT

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ABSTRACT

Attempted suicide with "rat poison" in a ten year old boy is reported. The aim is to highlight this seemingly uncommon condition in our society and to bring to fore the need for caution when these pesticides and rodenticides are used in the home. The patient was managed with intravenous infusion, antibiotics, pain relief, steroid and gastric lavage. He was discharged after due counselling and referred to a mental health professional for follow up.

KEYWORDS: Suicide, attempt, children, prevention

INTRODUCTION

There are many causes of death in man. Most deaths are caused by diseases while some are caused by accidents and injuries occasionally self-inflicted. Diseases like hypertension, heart disease, malignancies are common causes of death in adults whereas infections do same in children and adolescents.

Suicide (the act of killing oneself deliberately) is the second leading cause of death in adolescents in the western world (Neil W. Boris et al 2004). Rates of completed suicide increase steadily across the teen years and into adulthood. This is extremely rare before puberty (Neil W. Boris et al 2004). It is estimated that there are 5 to 45 suicide attempts for each completed suicide and up to 25% adolescents admit to suicidal ideation (Gail B. Slap et al 1989). Suicide attempt is the act of trying to take one's life often with no success, whereas threat spells a verbal act or statement where a need or desire is not met. However, there is paucity of reports on suicide and suicide attempts in Nigeria. When they occur, they rather attract headlines in the National dailies. This case report therefore is to highlight this seemingly uncommon condition in our environment.

CASE REPORT

A ten year old boy who was admitted to the Children's Emergency Room of the University of Calabar Teaching Hospital with the complaints of severe abdominal pain, vomiting and excessive salivation two hours after ingestion of a poisonous substance (rat poison) bought by the mother to kill rodents. Palm oil was administered as antidote at home. The boy admitted this was a suicide attempt after stealing from the father who threatened not to pay his school fees any further. The subject is the third of six children, one male and five females, a primary five pupil with good academic record. His mother is a petty trader while the father is a Reverend Minister. There is no history of psychiatric tendencies or suicide in the family. Systemic review was not contributory.

Clinical examination revealed an anxious boy writhing in pains, not dehydrated, not pale and not in respiratory distress. The lips and buccal mucosa were swollen but not bleeding. Pulse rate was 86 beats per minute, blood pressure of 90/50 mmHg was recorded. Respiratory and cardiovascular systems were essentially normal. Abdomen was soft not tender with no organs palpable. Central nervous system examination

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revealed a conscious boy, well oriented in time, place and persons. Cranial nerves were intact, motor and sensory functions were normal. A diagnosis of poisoning was made. Gastric lavage with 5% dextrose saline was performed. Effluent was mainly undigested food material. Full blood count, urea, electrolytes and creatinine were normal. He was placed on 5% dextrose saline and intravenous furosemide to force diuresis. Injectable analgesics, steroid and antibiotics were also administered. Seventy two hours into the admission, the buccal mucosal swelling subsided and he was fit for discharge. He was discharged after counselling to the out patient clinic for follow up and also referred to a child psychologist. He has made four visits to the out patient clinic and has remained well.

DISCUSSION

In developed societies, suicide attempts/threats are common among young people. In fact it ranks third as the most common cause of death in adolescents. In the United States of America and China this is common in the 15-24 years age range (Brian Robertson 1996). It is also known that half of all the children who have made one suicide attempt will make another, sometimes as many as two attempts a year until they succeed (Gail B. Slap et al 1989). This is most disturbing. Workers in this field of psychiatry have advanced many reasons why adolescents either commit, attempt or threaten suicide. Various risk factors have been identified as reasons for suicide and or attempt by young people. This include poor mental health, poor impulse control, family relationships, school performance, alcohol abuse, drug abuse, increased availability of fire arms, anger and depression (Karterine K. C. 1991, Phillip B. 1979). In some cases there is a significant psychopathology among family members either of suicide or depression. In the family of this ten year old boy both parents denied any cases of suicide or attempts in their ancestries. This of course could be a defensive mechanism to uphold the dignity of their families. Youngster sometimes resort to suicide attempts or most often a suicide threat as a manipulative behaviour to attract attention and thereby get what they want out of

sympathy or as a cry for help (Karterine K. C. 1991, Phillip B. 1979). This ten year old boy might have felt angry and hopeless about this life because his father had told him that he would not go to school again. He therefore felt there was no need for him to live anymore. He might however have made a threat to force his father to rescind the decision about his schooling.

The methods used for either suicides or suicide attempts vary. Suicide attempts/threats are more common in females than in males but males are more likely to complete the act.

The reason is that while males use more lethal weapons such as gunshots, females on the other hand use drugs which are less lethal (Gail B. Slap et al 1989). The consequences of the suicide attempts vary. Some attempts end up in inflicting light injuries, others end up in severe injuries that may render them incapable of normal function through out the rest of their lives.

The society should make every effort to prevent suicide and its attempts. Any act or behaviour with suspected suicide ideas should be taken seriously and attempt should be made to refer them for counseling by competent psychiatrist. Depression and other risk factors of suicide need be given due consideration by parents and physicians. In addition, reported cases of suicide attempts deserve adequate investigation and management to prevent possible suicide. Suicide, attempts and threats are still relatively low in Nigeria. The quality of films and movies our children see on the screen is worrisome and may bring negative influences to our children who would want to try out what they watch on the screens. Good child upbringing is also encouraged. Children should be loved, appreciated and protected against bad companies that may expose them to unhealthy habits and acts.

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