

Abandonment Of A Neonate With Natal Tooth

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ABSTRACT

A natal tooth is one that is already present in the mouth when a neonate is born while a neonatal tooth erupts within the first 28 days of life. Cultural views of natal teeth can differ significantly from positive to extremely negative. In Africa, especially in Nigeria, societal myths have led to unpleasant social experiences. Many African tribes believe that children born with teeth will bring misfortune to all the people they would interact with while others believe that such a condition can be regarded as a criterion for determining if a child is a witch.

It has been documented that the parents of such infants are stigmatized and often ostracized, rejected, scorned and shunned. Such parents have occasionally resorted to extreme actions such as infanticide or abandonment of the child. This case report documents a 3 day old male neonate with natal tooth who was abandoned on a refuse dump site at Olusosun, a rural community in Lagos State; and was brought to the Lagos State University Teaching Hospital, Ikeja (LASUTH) by the Lagos State Waste Management Authority (LAWMA) officials.

Key words: Natal tooth; LASUTH; Abandonment.

INTRODUCTION

A natal tooth is one that is already present in the mouth when a neonate is born while a neonatal tooth erupts within the first 28 days of life. It has been related to several factors, such as a superficial position of the tooth germ, infection, febrile states,¹ hormonal stimulation,² hereditary transmission of a dominant autosomal gene,³ and hypovitaminosis. Some investigators suggest that natal teeth may be associated with some syndromes such as Hallerman-Streiff,⁴ Ellis-Van Creveld,⁴ craniofacial dysostosis, multiple steacystoma⁵ and congenital pachyonychia. Morphologically, natal and neonatal teeth may

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be conical or of normal size and shape and opaque yellow/brownish in colour.⁶ The prevalence of natal and neonatal teeth has been estimated to be 1:1000 and 1:30,000 respectively. The incidence of natal and neonatal teeth is 85% in mandibular incisors, 11% in maxillary incisors, 3% in mandibular canines and molars and only 1% in maxillary posterior regions.

In Africa, especially in Nigeria, societal myths have led to unpleasant social experiences. African ethnographies also occasionally report that infants whose upper teeth erupt before their lower teeth have been killed because of such “developmental anomalies”.⁷ Among the Baribas in Benin republic, such a condition has been regarded as a criterion for determining if a child is a witch.⁸ It has been documented that the parents of such infants are stigmatized and often ostracized, rejected, scorned and shunned.⁹ Such parents have occasionally resorted to extreme actions such as infanticide or abandonment or dumping of the infants.

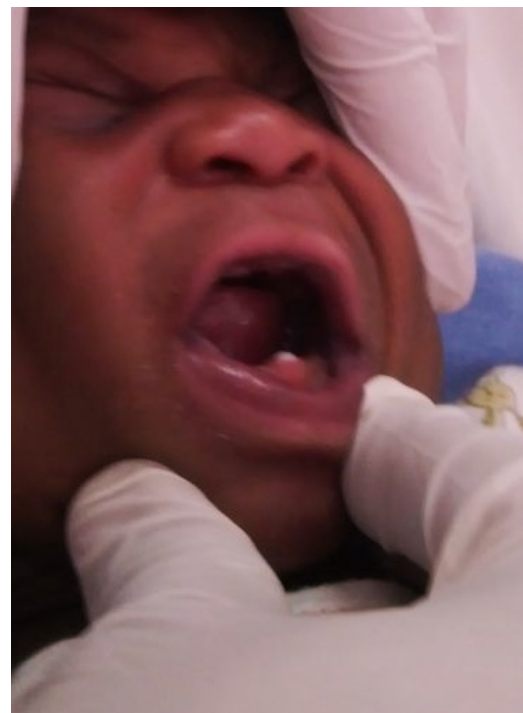
Baby abandonment¹⁰ is one of the most common forms of child abuse in Nigeria. Although this problem is a worldwide phenomenon.¹¹ It's frequent occurrence in Nigeria and the negative consequences it has on the babies concerned makes it a serious social problem that requires urgent attention. This case report is that of a 3 day old male neonate with natal tooth who was dumped on a refuse site at Olusosun, a rural community in Lagos State; and was brought to LASUTH by LAWMA officials.

On the 15th of October 2014, an approximately 3 day old male neonate abandoned on a refuse dump site at Olusosun in Lagos State was brought to the Lagos State University Teaching Hospital, Ikeja (LASUTH) by the Lagos State Waste Management Authority (LAWMA) officials. The baby was found wrapped in a flannel and with diapers on. There were no eye witnesses who observed the dumping of the baby. Physical examination revealed an alert neonate with features of post-datism as evidenced by scaly wrinkled skin on the digits and trunk. The child was pink, acyanosed, anicteric and fairly well hydrated with a temperature of 36.8°C. The occipito-frontal circumference was 35cm while the length and weight of the baby were 57cm and 3500g respectively. His primitive reflexes were present and his tone was normal. His pulse was palpable, synchronous and normal. There were no abnormal cardiovascular, respiratory or gastrointestinal findings on examination and he had a normal male uncircumcised genitalia. The scrotum was well developed with both testes palpable.

Extra-oral examination revealed no abnormalities and on intra-oral examination, oral soft tissues were found to be clinically healthy without any pathology, swellings, fibrous attachments or any signs of inflammation. There was a slight notching of the maxillary anterior gingiva but there was no

evidence of cleft lip or palate. One natal tooth was noted on the anterior mandible which was neither mobile nor associated with trauma to the oral soft tissues. The tooth was normal in shape, size and colour. An impression of an abandoned neonate due to a natal tooth was made. The patient was admitted into the Children

Emergency Ward and was adequately managed to avoid the risks of sepsis, hypothermia and hypoglycemia. Once the child was stable and his normal laboratory investigation findings were reviewed, he was transferred to one of the Lagos State Government operated motherless babies' homes.



DISCUSSION

Cultural views about natal and neonatal teeth can differ significantly from positive to extremely negative. In England, the belief was that babies born with teeth would grow to be famous soldiers, whereas in France and Italy, the belief was that this condition would guarantee the conquest of the world. However, the presence of teeth at birth was considered a bad omen by the Chinese, who believed that parents bitten by these natal teeth would die.¹² In Poland, India, and Africa, superstitions prevailed for a long time. In many African tribes, children born with natal teeth were murdered soon after birth because it was believed that they would bring misfortune to anyone they interact with. Abandonment or dumping of such neonates is also a common practice. Research shows that there will always be desperate mothers who feel that there are important reasons to abandon their children soon after birth.¹³ Reasons for these negative acts towards the infant may include negative childhood experiences, emotionally poor parental relationships, unfulfilled interpersonal relationship with the child's father, negative or adverse environmental and financial situations and poor living conditions.¹⁴

Available literature indicates that individuals who commit acts of infanticide and public abandonment are predominantly young, unmarried, physically healthy women who are pregnant for the first time and not addicted to substances.¹⁵ Although, there are no available

national statistics on the recorded cases of dumped or abandoned babies in Nigeria, occasional reports from different parts of the country indicate the alarming rate at which this criminal act is being perpetrated. In 2011, Lagos State recorded 497 cases of abandoned babies dumped in different streets of the state.¹⁶ This act of baby abandonment contravenes the Nigerian Child Right Act of 2003 which stipulates that no child should be subject to torture or other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment. Public Dental Health Practitioners, Paediatricians, Gynaecologists and Midwives as well as Social Scientist have a strong duty and obligation to educate the society about this harmless condition. There is a need to educate prospective mothers that natal tooth may be a normal variation in eruption sequence similar to delayed eruption and that their babies are not 'possessed'. Members of the general public should be continuously sensitized on the consequences of baby dumping and the need to desist from it. The populace also need to be enlightened to avoid stigmatising people who appear to have characteristics that differ from the norm and also to provide emotional support for pregnant women especially the young unmarried. The Judiciary should be empowered by Government to enforce legislation on the crime of infanticide and child dumping. Offenders should be jailed to serve as a strong deterrent to others who may be considering emulating this evil behaviour.

Nigeria may also need to emulate countries, such as the United States, where the problem of “baby dumping” has been addressed by “safe haven” legislation.¹⁷ Such laws generally provide for babies to be left at locations such as hospitals, police stations and fire stations. As an incentive, safe haven laws generally allow the parent to remain anonymous and to be protected from prosecution for abandonment or neglect as long as the infant is left in one of the designated safe havens and has not been abused or otherwise mistreated.

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