

Treatment of Snakebite at the Terminal State: Looking Back to Thousands of Years

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“Snakebite” can be considered to be the most commonly experienced poisoning which, in most of the situations ends with a fatal outcome. Death occurs either due to the effect of the venom or fear or a combination of both.

The experience of fatality due to snake venom is not new for the human society. In the Indian literatures a good number of poisonous snakes and their fatal actions are mentioned. Some potent poisonous snakes viz. Takshaka, Basuki etc. are said to be the divine snakes and the reason behind their bite is considered to be due to curse, misfortune or sinful activities.

Charaka and Susruta, the most ancient scholars and researchers of ancient health science (Ayurveda), in their famous books Charaka Samhita and Susruta Samhita, discuss in detail about the snakes (sarpa) and snakebites (sarpadangsa) with special reference to type of venom, signs and symptoms of snakebite, treatment, prognosis etc. which are interesting with ampoule of scope for research.

Treatment of snakebite is a critical problem for the medical professionals. In each and every step of the course of treatment caution and intelligence in decision making is must. Slight deviation from the principle and delay in action may end at failure.

Searching for the benefit of the patients of snakebite the researchers are developing treatment protocols which are being implemented in the field of toxicology. But, probably not being able to attain the expected goal.

In Charaka Samhita and Susruta Samhita 24 treatment procedures for treatment of poisoning (chaturvingsati bisha upakrama) are discussed in detail. One interesting among them is - “giving incision and application of fresh meat on the vertex of the patient of snakebite at the terminal state (when the patient is seemed to be at the door of sure death)”. The name of this step is given as “KAKAPADA”. The literary meaning of the word “kakapada” is “the foot of crow”. In this process an incision of crow foot shape (having 4 incisions starting from one point) is given on the vertex after shaving of the hair. When the incisions bleed fresh meat of peacock, chick, goat, buffalo or cow are advised to keep on it. As the mode of action it is said that, the fresh meat absorbs the poison through the incisions with blood and if this process will be applied accordingly observing the condition of the patient then the patient may regain life. This procedure is advised to apply at the terminal state of snakebite when the patient shows the signs like – loss of sense, drooping of eyelids, loss of functions of the sense organs etc. Interestingly, to apply the procedure, the physician is advised to explain the benefit and loss of application or non-application of the same as the benefit is doubtful. But application of the procedure is said to be preferable as there is some chance of recovery whereas non application means pushing the person to sure death. A consent of the guardians/attendants is mentioned as the precondition for application of this treatment procedure.

“Kakapada” may be proved to be a boon to the patients of snakebite at the terminal state if studied and evaluated with multidisciplinary effort.

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