

A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE HEALTH SEEKING BEHAVIOUR OF A SELECTED TRIBAL POPULATION DURING COVID-19 IN WAYANAD

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INTRODUCTION

- Healthcare-seeking behaviour: “Any action or inaction undertaken by individuals who perceive themselves to have a health problem or to be ill to find an appropriate remedy”.
- Health-seeking behavior during Covid –19 among tribal people had suffered a setback. The initial lockdown period and disrupted transportation services making it impossible for tribal people to access health care services.
- The pandemic had also caused fear among those living in tribal hamlets for stepping out from their area. Also, Covid-19 had caused a large group of people to be unemployed which has made it difficult to afford healthcare.

METHODOLOGY

- An institution based qualitative study was done using an exploratory approach to know about the health seeking behaviors of tribal people in Amritakripa Charitable Hospital, Kainatty, Kalpetta.
- In-depth interviews were conducted using an interview guide among selected Tribal Promoters, Health care workers and Tribal people.

RESULTS

- Four major themes emerged from the analysis: Health issues and Habits mentioned by health care workers among tribal people; Provision of health care services; Changes in patients attitude towards health care services; Barrier/ challenges/ problems faced.
- Scabies and malnutrition : major concern among children and adolescents. Malnutrition in children could indicate the inappropriate use of the PDS which was established by the Government of India and Scabies could be due to improper unhygienic practices.
- The use of alcohol is high among tribal men but lockdown had caused a break in the supply of alcohol and the use of betel nut could had increased during lockdown and children above the age of 3 were accustomed to betel nut chewing.
- tribal peoples' health seeking behaviours has increased significantly since past few years and the healthcare services were satisfactory for them at the hospital where the study was conducted.
- The treatment services are free for the tribal. It was not only due to the cost free services but also because of the quality and other socio-demographic factors that people preferred this hospitals services than the others.

Theme 1: Health issues and Habits mentioned by health care workers among tribal people:

- Scabies was common among children and adolescents.
- Betel nut chewing among 3 year olds.
- Decrease in respiratory health problems other than COVID during the pandemic.

Theme 2: Provision of health care services:

- Before the pandemic, the follow-up and check-ups were regularly followed by the tribal peoples, camps would be held in certain areas.
- Initial period of lockdown : tribal people were not able to reach the healthcare centres for medications.
- Not everyone had access to transport services provided by the tribal department.

Theme 3: Changes in patients attitude towards health care services

- Overall, there are higher number of people using healthcare services than the previous generation.
- Before pandemic: those under regular medication had come for follow up regularly and there were also the other few who had come for checkups often.
- During the pandemic: They were initially scared to step out from their houses due to the fear of contracting the infection.

Theme 4: Barrier/ challenges/ problems faced:

- Health care facilities** : financial issues, inability to conduct camps during the pandemic, man power issues, compliance of the tribal people to follow medications, referral to higher centres in case of severe illness and the ignorance of health care in certain tribal people due to lack of awareness regarding healthcare and unavailability of transport.
- Tribal people**: Transport to healthcare facilities for the tribal people during the pandemic was difficult.

“I see in children mostly skin diseases. So many kids, mainly in the area where the wear the panty, back and armpit are seen..”

“Diarrhoeal diseases were seen less, they do not go out right. They don't have food from here and there. Jaundice had decreased. Usually, every year there is always a diarrhoeal case or jaundice.”

“When we ask kids why there is orange stain they say that my mother gave it to me yesterday. Once you chew those, they will not be so much hungry”

“There has been a huge decrease in the asthmatic and allergic patients during the COVID times.”

“I used to come every month but after pandemic came I could not get my medicines regularly”

“I have come here walking from home; it is 40km from here tested and then i walked back.

“When Covid came we were scared , we never got out of house to anywhere”

“It was before COVID that more people came, after COVID came number decreased. Now I feel people who are in critical stages come here more often, people with cancer or those who are pregnant.”

“Even if we go and tell them they won't bother. The present generation is okay, the older generation they still do not listen or come. Among them the present generation is trying to be aware.”

“When I asked the promoter about transport, they told there is nothing like that and it is only available for bedridden patients, so i had to walk.”

LIMITATIONS: The study was done among health care workers and patients utilizing health services of a private hospital and a vast majority of health care workers and patients utilizing other healthcare facilities were not captured. The study was not able to capture thoughts of people representing all tribal peoples due to feasibility issues.

CONCLUSION: The study reveals that COVID 19 had a negative impact on the health seeking behaviour when compared to before the pandemic due to factors such as unavailability of transport. It was difficult for tribal people to reach from places that were far off from the centre, also the fear of getting infected was another reason for not accessing healthcare services. The health seeking behaviour can be improved by creating awareness regarding health care facilities and also improving access to healthcare services for the tribal peoples in inaccessible areas by arranging more transport and also by conducting more camps. This study highlights areas where improvement can be done to promote more use of the health care facilities by the tribal people.