

Lizard as psychoactive fauna: an unconventional addiction

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Abstract

The use of innovative and unconventional psychoactive substances by people has always surprised mankind and psychoactive fauna as a substance of abuse representing one such strange and dangerous practice. Psychoactive fauna refers to the group of animals whose body parts or excretions contain one or more substances which, in a sufficiently high dose, have the potential to alter the user's state of consciousness. With this case report of abuse of lizard tail by a cannabis dependent prisoner, we aim to sensitize the community toward fast growing and not so uncommon problem of abuse of psychoactive fauna.

KEY WORDS: Unconventional substance abuse; psychoactive fauna; lizard addiction

Introduction

Abuse of psychoactive substances is as old as mankind itself. Innovative techniques, unusual routes of administration, and experimenting with unconventional psychoactive substances by substance users have always surprised mankind particularly addiction specialists. Presence of psychoactive substances in plants is a well-recognized and well-known fact. However, there have been a few reports of use of psychoactive fauna and in some cases its use being in a magnitude qualifying to be a problem in the society.^[1] Psychoactive fauna is used to denote the group of animals whose body parts or excretions contain one or more substances which, in a sufficiently high dose, have the potential to alter the user's state of consciousness, for example, snake (venom), scorpion (sting), wasps, toads (skin), etc.^[2]

The exact cause or substance responsible for the psychoactive effect of most of these animals is not clear. There are few strange incidences reported in papers of use of lizard

excreta in some popular brands of 'Ghutka' believing it to give an extra kick to the user.^[3]

Though some researchers and news papers have reported people using dried lizard tails, snake oil, and stings of wasps to gain a feeling of high but the abuse of psychoactive fauna has not been reported and discussed in detail in medical literature.^[4] We report a rare case of abuse of lizard tail powder by a prisoner with cannabis dependence.

Case Report

A 32-year-old man convict with a history of cannabis dependence for past 10 years admitted shifting to lizards as alternative substance of abuse during the periods of non-availability of cannabis while serving his term in jail.

On detailed enquiry by the visiting psychiatrist in jail, he reported hitting lizards to death followed by resection of their tails. He would then dry it under sun and burn dried tail to a charred residue. He would subsequently fill bidis with this charred residue and smoke with deep inhalation. He would experience "instant high" and a sense of relaxation equally pleasurable to cannabis. He claimed being introduced to this practice by other prison inmates who were already abusing tail powder of the wall lizard.

He had been presented to visiting psychiatrist for the complaints of insomnia, irritability, and restlessness when he was not able to get cannabis or lizard tail powder. However, no psychopathology was found in him on further assessment.

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He was prescribed tablet clonazepam (1 mg hs) for these symptoms and motivational enhancement therapy was planned.

Discussion

The reports of abuse of unconventional substances especially psychoactive fauna have always surprised mankind and medical fraternity particularly addiction specialists. Though this practice is not as new or rare as thought of, the propensity of indulging in a particular substance of use is determined by a multitude of factors, such as the personality profiles, socio-cultural milieu, availability and accessibility of the substance, and comorbid psychopathology. During adverse conditions due to non-availability of drugs or other substances of abuse, the man has found alternatives in the form of lizard powder, snake and scorpion venom, and wasp sting. There have been a few published reports of alternative use of scorpion sting by heroin dependent^[1] and lizard tail by cannabis addicts^[1,5] during non-availability of original substance of abuse. In our case also, the prisoner started experimenting with lizard tail powder when cannabis became non-available to him in jail. The psychoactive properties of lizard, which cause addiction, are not known. However, it is surprising to note that in all the previous reports we could access lizards that were used by cannabis addicts. Whether this hints toward psychoactive ingredient of lizard tail being similar to cannabis or is merely a coincidence needs further research. Future research should also be directed at finding the root cause of this addiction and long-term effects of such addictions.

Of further significance, apart from understanding biopsychosocial aspects of this unusual addiction, is the legal concern. Narcotic drug and psychotropic substance act 1985 which is the primary law governing and regulating the illicit trade of psychotropic drugs in India does not cover this peculiar

problem as the list of narcotic and psychotropic substances mentioned in the act does not include any psychoactive fauna.^[6]

Conclusion

This case report of unconventional addiction to lizards is not just to invoke surprise or interest in the readers. Rather this calls for the urgent need to understand the exact magnitude of this problem, gear research to unfold biopsychosocial underpinnings of addiction to psychoactive fauna, mechanisms to curtail the problem in its infancy stage, and need to improve and upgrade the law governing psychotropic substances.

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