Contents

EDITORIAL

Indian festivals: Ethos and health impact
Yeolekar ME, Bavdekar SB 219

ORIGINAL ARTICLES

A prospective randomized comparative study of the effects of intranasal and transdermal 17 β-estradiol on postmenopausal symptoms and vaginal cytology
Odabaşı AR, Yüksel H, Demirean SS, Kaçar DF, Çulhac N, Özkara EE 221

Miliary tuberculosis in human immunodeficiency virus infected patients not on antiretroviral therapy: Clinical profile and response to short-course chemotherapy
Swaminathan S, Padmapriyadarsini C, Ponnuraja C, Sumathi CH, Rajasekaran S, Amerandran VA, Reddy MVK, Deivanayagam CN 228

Retrospective study of severe cases of leptospirosis admitted in the intensive care unit
Ittyachen AM, Krishnapillai TV, Nair MC, Rajan AR 232

Field rats form a major infection source of leptospirosis in and around Madurai, India

Regional brain metabolism in schizophrenia: The influence of antipsychotics
Seethalakshmi R, Parkar SR, Nair N, Batra SA, Pandit AG, Adarkar SA, Baghel NS, Moghe SH 241

CASE REPORTS

Tumoral calcinosis of the foot with unusual presentation in an 11-year-old boy: A case report and review of literature
Mohamed S, Jong-Hun J, Weon-Yoo K 247

Immune reconstitution inflammatory syndrome in a patient with cryptococcal lymphadenitis as the first presentation of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
Tahir M, Sharma SK, Sinha S, Das CJ 250

Great auricular nerve involvement in leprosy: Scope for misdiagnosis
Ramesh V, Jain RK, Avninder S 253

IMAGES IN RADIOLOGY

Snap sound and detumescence: Fracture penis
Rao A, Surendrababu NRS 255

REVIEW ARTICLE

One gene, many phenotypes
Prasun P, Pradhan M, Agarwal S 257

VIEW POINT

Religion, spirituality, health and medicine: Why should Indian physicians care?
Chattopadhyay S 262
Indian festivals: Ethos and health impact

India possesses a diverse and rich cultural heritage and is renowned as a ‘land of festivals’. The festive season commences right after the harvest season and brings joy and cheer in the life of people. Festivals obviously not only have social and economic implications but also bear an impact on the healthcare system.

Ganesh festival is one of the most popular festivals in India and is celebrated in honor of Lord Ganesh, the elephant-headed son of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati. Lord Ganesh is widely worshipped as the supreme God of wisdom, prosperity and good fortune. Mythologically, it is said that in a fit of anger, Lord Shiva severed Ganesh’s head. Repenting his actions, he thereafter transplanted an elephant’s head on Lord Ganesh. This is considered the first illustration of transplantation. Ganesh festival is celebrated for a period varying from 2 to 10 days. A clay idol of Lord Ganesh is brought home on the first day of the festival (Ganeshotsava) and is worshipped until the day of immersion. During Ganeshotsava, idols of Ganesh are exhibited in various public places as well.

Devotees visit such places, and during this festival the city does not sleep. Most idols are immersed on the tenth day when millions of people, including tourists from abroad, turn out on the roads to participate and watch the processions that wind through the various city roads. It is noteworthy that, despite the high turnouts, people’s behavior is quite disciplined and there are hardly any incidents of stampede, which may be expected with such huge and prolonged gatherings. As the cities have expanded and enthusiasm has grown, the number of idols has also increased manifold. This puts a strain on city roads and other infrastructural facilities, leading to traffic congestion. Moreover, the air and noise pollution has raised environmental concerns. In the past, the idols were made of clay and were immersed in the sea and other water pools. Over the years, the practice has changed with organizers of Ganesh festival vying with each other to have taller and larger-sized idols that are made of plaster of Paris, which contains gypsum, sulphur, phosphorus and magnesium. Paints used for coloring the idols contain mercury, cadmium, lead and carbon. When these idols are immersed in rivers, lakes and ponds, they pollute the water bodies by bringing about changes in pH and increasing the concentration of solid matter and heavy metals. Various measures have been suggested to minimize the damage, including having smaller idols, using permanent idols made of brass or stone, using natural substances like clay or easily degradable materials like paper for making idols and avoiding the use of thermocol.

Lord Krishna is another popular Hindu god in whose honor the festival of Janmashtami is celebrated. The festival is also known as ‘Govinda’, ‘Dahikaalaa’ and ‘Dahi handi’. Devotees serve milk and milk products to the deity. This festival also helps to stress on the importance of milk and milk products. During this festival, pots containing milk, curd and other nutritious substances are hung at various heights in the neighbourhood. Bands of youth take up the challenge of reaching these pots by forming human pyramids or human towers. This festival promotes team work and the importance of physical fitness, agility and other physical and psychomotor skills. These human pyramids or towers are a spectacle worth watching. As with any sport, this human pyramid formation also carries some risk of injury. Several attempts at forming a human pyramid would fail and result usually in minor injuries to the participants. However, occasionally, such attempts may result in severe injuries such as fractures of the limbs and spinal cord damage. Since the participants number several thousands, hospital administrators make special efforts to manage patients coming with such injuries during Janmashtami.

Navaratri, the festival of nine nights, is characterized by worship and dance in honor of Goddesses Durga (Goddess of bravery), Lakshmi (Goddess of wealth and prosperity) and Saraswati (Goddess of wisdom).[1] This festival commemorates the importance of ‘woman power’. Although, traditionally, women in India have been largely confined to home-making, their prowess and role in the society have always been lauded. Although they still constitute a relatively disadvantaged section of the society with comparatively increased prevalence of medical problems such as anemia and osteoporosis, their contribution in ensuring social and economic wellbeing has always been recognized. This festival is a tribute to this very important role women play in family and society.

Diwali, the festival of lights, is celebrated to commemorate the victory of good over evil, of knowledge over ignorance, of light over darkness and of hope over depression and despair. The first day of Diwali begins with Dhanvantari Trayodashi or Dhanteras. Dhanvantari, the incarnation of Lord Vishnu and a physician to the Gods according to Hindu mythology, prepared the samhitas on Ayurveda in eight divisions. The worship of Lord Dhanvantari on the first day of Diwali is a way of expressing gratitude for his teaching Ayurveda, the science of life. The festival, in general, stresses on strengthening family bonds and brotherhood. In several modern societies, the family bonds are under strain for various reasons, which include faster pace of life, pressures on career and breakdown of joint...
families. During this most auspicious festival, large families meet to foster their ties and exchange gifts. Decoration with lights and bursting of crackers are salient features of the festival. However, excessive use of crackers has been a matter of concern. Firecrackers increase the concentrations of cobalt, nickel, chromium and cadmium in air.[2] Studies have also shown that there has been an increase in the particulate matter, sulphur dioxide and NO in air well beyond the safety ranges prescribed in the National Ambient Air Quality Standard[2,3] The pollution induces susceptible individuals to develop irritation and inflammation of the respiratory tract and episodes of cough and wheezing. These episodes need to be prevented by minimizing exposure, introducing prophylactic therapy or enhancing doses of prophylactic medications. Besides, burns and a variety of ocular injuries have been reported and are a matter of concern.[4-6] Hospitals remain on guard to attend patients with burns and other injuries. Restrictions have been put on bursting crackers. Initiatives like ‘noiseless’ Diwali are also gaining ground.

India is a multi-religious, multi-ethnic society. Indians celebrate festivals such as Ganeshotsava, Dahikaalaa, Navratri, Diwali, Id and Christmas with gaiety and fanfare whether they are staying in India or abroad. This year, a part of the holy month of Ramadan coincided with Navaratri. Muslims observe a dawn-to-dusk fast during this month. The fasting helps build the quality of self-control.[7] However, sick persons, young children and pregnant and lactating women tend to be vulnerable. The effects of long-duration fast on health have been a subject of interest of several studies.[8-14]

It is true that festivals help further family and community bonds. It is also important that festivals are celebrated to ensure that the indigenous culture is alive and vibrant. Many of these festivals bring in cheer and happiness into the families and societies. People accumulate new assets during these days boosting the local economy. However, there exists a need to revisit certain practices and ensure that disturbance and nuisance to community at large are minimized and undue damage to environment is avoided.

Yeolekar ME, Bavdekar SB*
Director (Medical Education and Health), *Editor, Journal of Postgraduate Medicine and Professor of Pediatrics, Seth GS Medical College and KEM Hospital, Parel, Mumbai - 400012, India.
E-mail: drsbavdekar@vsnl.com

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