

Growing Menace of Topical Corticosteroids Misuse

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Abstract :

The scenario of Indian Dermatology is conspicuously marred by numerous vices. One such prevalent vice being the unbridled use of topical corticosteroids for various situations and the accompanying rise in the patients presenting with adverse effects of topical corticosteroids. This review article aims to highlight the rampant steroid abuse in the field of Dermatology and the steps undertaken to curb the same.

Keywords : Topical corticosteroids, misuse/abuse, ITATSA

Introduction : In 1935, Kendall et al discerned extracts from bovine adrenal gland and named them Compound A to F among which Compound E was Cortisone & Compound F was hydrocortisone(1). After a Mayo Clinic group put Cortisone & ACTH to use in Rheumatoid Arthritis,(2) Sulzberger & associates introduced the use of cortisone and ACTH in a variety of inflammatory dermatoses.(3) Thus corticosteroids were unleashed in the world of Dermatology and changed the course of Dermato-therapeutics permanently. Despite the introduction of steroid sparing agents like Azathioprine & Cyclophosphamide, the popularity of steroids did not see any waning. With the advent of time, reports of the adverse effects of steroids started making rounds which led Reichling & Kligman to suggest alternate day regimens of steroid use. Various studies have been

conducted to focus on the side effects of steroids & their misuse which shall be briefed below.

Present Scenario : Many studies have been conducted across the globe to evaluate the extent of steroid misuse.^(4,5,6,12,19) Similar studies have been conducted in India since the pioneering article in 2006.⁽⁷⁾ Despite the growing evidences and need of the time, the studies remain limited in this area of Dermatopharmacology. Various studies confirm the uncontested rampant prevalence of Topical Corticosteroid(TC) abuse. A recent rural hospital-based study showed that 28% of 500 prescriptions had TCs, out of which 98% were very potent corticosteroids; and in 85% of cases, the basis of prescribing TCs could not be established⁽⁸⁾ suggesting the significant prevalence of Steroid use without proper indication. A large scale multi-centre study across India exposed that out of all patients with facial dermatoses screened for TC use, 14.8% were using TC. TC was used as a fairness/general purpose cream or aftershave in 29% and in 24% for acne. Steroid combinations were used by 59.6%.⁽⁹⁾ Data from various other studies confirm to this finding that TC are being exploited for various reasons which are not rational indications of TC or Combination use.⁽¹⁰⁾

What Underlies This Misuse : This blame of TC misuse lies with the manufacturer, the prescriber, the dispenser, the end-user as well as the Drug Regulating Authorities and this has been proven so in many studies.^(9,11,12) Relevant section of the book "Law related to drugs and cosmetics" states that TC belong Schedule H drugs which means they cannot be prescribed without a valid prescription.^(13,14) Despite of this, study found that a whopping 59.3 % patients with TC use on face were 'recommended' by a non-physician source and dispensed by the pharmacist without obvious prescription. It also concluded that 14.8% of patients with facial dermatoses were using TC, and that fairness or shaving cream (29%) was the most common reason for its use among the study cohort. The main reason for its abuse as a fairness agent is Indian obsessiveness with fair skin colour. This is being exploited by pharmaceutical marketing companies and beauticians.⁽⁹⁾

The IMS Health data reveals that the sale of TC at the end of

December 2013 was INR 1400 crore with an annual growth of 16% and this accounts for 82% of Topical drugs market in Dermatology.⁽¹⁵⁾ Looking at the high stakes involved in this drug market, it is no doubt that the manufacturing & marketing units will try their level best to further the sales of this magic drug through unethical ways to promote their sales by easy Over-The-Counter availability of TC & their promotion as Fairness and Multi-purpose creams. This can be easily observed even in the national televisions and newspapers which unethically promote prescription-less use of these creams.^(16,17,18)

The lack of qualified dermatologists to cater to the needs of the billions population of India especially in rural areas is another reason for the unprecedented rise in TC misuse. This lack results in illiterate patients seeking treatment from unqualified people thus contributing to the public nuisance. Sometimes even the dermatologist is at fault if he fails to mention in his prescription the exact dosing, schedule and extent of use of TC.

Despite the presence of various Rules & Regulations which serve to bridle the drug abuse^(17,18), the lack of proper implementation renders these rules useless. There is no authority which traps the wrong- doers when manufacturing, prescribing, dispensing and purchasing TC. This lacuna can be filled up only by constant vigilance on part of the Doctors, Regulating authorities & sensitized public.

What Is Being Done : Indian Association of Dermatologists, Venereologists & Leprologists (IADVL) has started a nationwide campaign against Topical Steroid Abuse under the banner of IADVL's Taskforce Against Topical Steroid Abuse (ITATSA). This campaign aims to sensitise the parties at fault regarding proper and ethical use of TC. This taskforce has come up with ways to tackle this issue. If any doctor/dermatologists come across any person/pharmacist/beautician selling products for fairness/other purposes unethically, can be tested for steroid contents in any one FDA approved laboratory. If tested positive or with evidence of direct sale of TC without prescription, a complaint against such offender can be made to the IADVL or Commissioner FDA on comm.fda-mah@nic.in. Actions against manufacturers & distributors is also being taken. This requires co-operation

from the doctors as well as general public.^(16,17)

Conclusion : Despite the on-going war against TC misuse, its prevalence is far from decreasing. The Indian scenario requires to undertake studies to evaluate the underlying reasons for this abuse and its far-reaching adverse effects. Further introduction of stricter laws and re-structuring the existing laws relating the prescription of TC and their proper implementation is burning need of the hour. Also, creating public awareness regarding the misuse of TC and its complications in general masses is a requisite. Dermatologists play an important role in creation of this environment.

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