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The Effect of Perceptions and Attitudes Towards Menstrual Bleeding on Women's Health*
Menstrual Kanamaya Yönelik Algı ve Tutumların Kadın Sağlığına Etkisi

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ABSTRACT

Menstrual bleeding and menstruation process is a physiological process that a woman experiences as monthly periods throughout her life as of the pubertal period, and it is seen as a taboo in many societies and is not talked about. In our study, we aimed to compile the attitudes and practices towards menstrual bleeding from past to present. While menstrual bleeding was considered sacred in some cultures in past cultures; in some, it has been a topic that is ashamed and cannot be talked about. In present days, due to the cultural taboos against menstruation, there is a lack of information about these issues and this affects reproductive health negatively. Menstrual hygiene information and education should be organized to eliminate incomplete and wrong menstrual practices, and this education should constitute an important part of health education.

Keywords: Menstruation, Menstrual Bleeding, Taboo, Woman health

ÖZET

Menstrual kanama ve menstruasyon süreci, bir kadının ergenlik döneminden itibaren hayatı boyunca aylık periyotlar halinde yaşadığı fizyolojik bir süreçtir ve birçok toplumda tabu olarak görülerek hakkında konuşulmamaktadır. Çalışmamızda geçmişten günümüze menstrual kanamaya yönelik tutum ve uygulamaları derlemeyi amaçladık. Geçmişte bazı kültürlerde adet kanaması kutsal kabul edilirken; bazılarında utanılacak, hakkında konuşulmayan bir konu olmuştur. Günümüzde adet görmeye karşı kültürel tabular nedeniyle bu konularda bilgi eksikliği bulunmakta ve bu durum kadın üreme sağlığını olumsuz etkileyebilmektedir. Eksik ve yanlış menstrual uygulamaların ortadan kaldırılması için menstrual hijyen konusunda bilgilendirme ve eğitimler düzenlenmeli ve bu eğitimler sağlık eğitiminin önemli bir bölümünü oluşturmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Menstruasyon, Menstrual kanama, Tabu, Kadın Sağlığı

INTRODUCTION

Reproductive health is a concept that encompasses both women and men and has a direct impact on women's lives. Although menstrual bleeding is a natural and unique process that shows fertility for women, it is one of the most important biological differences between men and women (Lamborn, 2017; Wang, 2018). Menstrual bleeding is a part of the reproductive cycle of women that starts with puberty and continues as monthly periods throughout the fertile period and is called menstruation (Hamal & Susma, 2014). In other words, the period of vaginal bleeding, which begins in the adolescence period with the hormonal cycle in the reproductive system and continues until the menopausal period, which women experience periodically for 3-5 days every month is called the menstrual period (Abiç & Vefikuluçay Yılmaz, 2020; Hotun Şahin, 2015).

Although menstrual bleeding is a natural part of growth and development, it has become an unspoken and taboo subject (Spadaro, d'Elia, & Mosso, 2018). Some issues about reproductive health and problems, especially in developing countries, are not discussed clearly and clearly. This situation is the beginning of reproduction in the pubertal period; it also creates obstacles in the healthy learning of reproductive health knowledge, which is one of the most important issues to be known for adolescents. The physiological reproductive process has become taboo in many societies, naming it as shameful and objectionable (Kaundal & Thakur, 2017). Lack of knowledge about these taboo issues can negatively affect reproductive health by creating problems in attitudes and behaviours in women and causing different problems to emerge later in life (Hamal & Susma, 2014).

Taboo; based on moral judgment and beliefs, is called a strong social ban regarding any area of activity or traditions that is seen as sacred (Kaundal & Thakur, 2017; Turkish Language Association, 2020). Breaking the taboo is often considered objectionable by society (Kaundal & Thakur, 2017). It is thought that taboo is kept the same with concepts such as morality and tradition. In the sociological dimension, the meaning and management of menstrual bleeding vary due to cultural differences in values and morals (Ali & Rizvi, 2010). Due to these differences, with the onset of menarche, adolescents; it is known that it turns into individuals who are introverted, willing

to receive information but are afraid of expressing it, and who think that bleeding is bad, shame and something to be hidden. Due to the cultural taboos against menstruation, besides women's need for information about the natural process; consultancy and treatment for their problems related to menstruation, menarche and menopause affect the situations, which limits the daily lives of women and even causes serious health problems (Lamborn, 2017; Tan, Haththotuwa, & Fraser, 2017).

The average age of menarche of women in Turkey is 12 years old (Turkey National Pediatric Association, 2014), and the average age of menopause is reported to be 47-49 years of age (Polat & Aylaz, 2020). Based on this information, it can be said that women experience menstrual bleeding for an average of two thousand days of their lives. This cycle emerges with the onset of pubertal development during school childhood. School childhood is the period when body image is acquired, and socialization begins (Arıkan, Çelebioğlu, & Güdücü Tüfekçi, 2013). During this period, children shape their own identities with the correct knowledge and experiences they have acquired. The onset of menstruation requires a special approach for children during this period (Arıkan et al., 2013). During puberty, the child should be taught to overcome this situation healthily and that menstruation is a normal part of the growth and development process. Likewise, a woman entering the menopause period should know that the termination of menstruation is a normal physiological process. It should be known that the first menstruation or menopause periods are not a situation to hide, be ashamed of, but a part of normal human life.

Differences in ethnicity of women and families seeking medical help or counselling about menstrual bleeding are an element to be considered in the education process. Due to the universalization of clinical practices, health care professionals should be aware of cultural perceptions and attitudes regarding the menstrual process, especially reproductive health and physiology, and shape their education by taking these factors into account (Tan et al., 2017). This review, it is aimed to examine the attitudes and perceptions of different cultures from past to present against menstruation, which is a physiological condition.

In Mythology and Past Cultures Perceptions and Attitudes

Many values have been attributed to menstrual bleeding in past cultures; while in some cultures it is considered sacred or punishing; in some, it has been a topic that is ashamed and cannot be talked about. It is reported that various cultural myths and misconceptions lead to the formation of menstrual taboos (Bhartiya, 2013; Lamborn, 2017). Symbolic pollution and taboo attributed to menstrual bleeding have been explored through anthropological studies (Manica & Rios, 2017). When these anthropologic studies are examined; It has been determined that the myths and legends related to the menstrual bleeding of women are frequently mentioned in the histories of past cultures. It is reported that menstruation has become the object of different taboos and rituals in the mythology and legends of almost all cultures and is displayed together in good and bad symbols (Tan et al., 2017).

The terms "menstruation" and "mens" are derived from the Latin words "mensis" and Greek "mene". Therefore, the word "menstruation" is etymologically associated with the "moon" (Tan et al., 2017). Menstrual blood and the menstrual cycle in ancient times are associated with mythological Gods. All Greek goddesses in ancient times were once believed to be moon goddesses. By associating the phases of the moon with the menstrual cycle of women, people thought that with the movements of the moon, the menstrual cycle occurred (Behjati-ardakani, Akhondi, Mahmoodzadeh, & Hosseini, 2016). The menstrual blood, believed to be given by the god or the moon, which kept the old gods alive, revived the souls of ancestors, empowered witches, poets, wise women, was called "Amrita" or "Goddess mother's milk" in Sanskrit, meaning immortal (Walker, 2010).

In ancient mythologies, it was thought that menstruation was a condition related to gods. In Greek mythology, ancient India, Scandinavian mythology and ancient Egypt, it is reported that the gods needed menstrual blood to maintain their power (Seven, 2018; Tan et al., 2017). Similarly, in the legends of ancient cultures and tribes, menstrual blood was glorified, and it was seen that a situation that gave women the ability to prophesy and foresight (Tan et al., 2017). It has also been reported that men perceive it as a threat and believe that harm will come to them, as women's menstrual bleeding is associated with

being a supreme being (Tan et al., 2017). This has led to the belief that menstruation, which is a part of the normal physiological process, creates a good or bad pressure on women, brings bad luck in some cultures and impairs health (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013; Seven, 2018).

In parallel with the advancement of technology from the past to the present, the ongoing taboos about menstruation and the onset of stigmatization with the onset of menstruation during adolescence have led to research on the effects of menstruation on the female body (Ott & Vannelli, 2018). Towards the middle of the twentieth century, scientists reported that during menstrual bleeding, studies were conducted to show that women expel toxic elements from their blood, sweat, saliva, urine and tears from the body (Tan et al., 2017). Bela Schick, one of the famous physicians of that period, experimented with touching flowers by menstruating and non-menstruating women and reported that the flower touched by the menstruating woman faded the next day. The reason for this is that the menstruating woman thinks that the toxin is discharged from her body. He also claimed that these harmful toxins secreted prevent the dough from leavening and cause the spoilage of beer, wine and pickles. In the following years, many studies were conducted to verify this argument, but this thought was refuted (Tan et al., 2017; Webster, 2017).

Perceptions and Attitudes in Today's Cultures

Menstruation is not only a biological process; it's also a universal and social issue (Tingle, C & Vora, 2018). Although negative beliefs about menstrual bleeding, which were frequently encountered in past cultures, are decreasing today, it is seen that negative attitudes continue in the perspectives of both genders (Tan et al., 2017). In many cultures, menstrual bleeding is seen as impurity and the menstrual cycle is thought to be a purification process that cleans the female body (Varghese et al., 2015). It is known that in underdeveloped countries such as Nigeria, Kenya and Tanzania, girls and women who menstruate are often kept in separate huts and are forced into social isolation. During these periods, women are not allowed to prepare food, communicate with others, and participate in religious and social activities (Padmanabhanunni Jaffer, & Steenkamp, 2018). It is thought that this situation affects girls as well as women and deprived them of activities such as playing games and going to

school (UNESCO, 2014). In some cultures, women are required to take a ceremonial bath (e.g. Jewish Miswah) to purify themselves before getting close to a man, because of the belief that women are not clean during their menstrual periods (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013). In India, traditional taboos such as social isolation, exclusion and stigma imposed on girls and women during menstrual bleeding continue (Arora, 2017). It has also been reported that menstrual taboos play an important role in teaching girls and young women to discipline their bodies and manage menstruation according to certain norms (Arora, 2017). Similarly, in Nepal, it is known that the practice of "chhaupadi", where women were isolated in their huts during menstruation, existed until 2017 and was later prohibited by the government (Tingle, C & Vora, 2018). In some African countries, girls who start menstrual bleeding as an indication that they are not pregnant are shown respect with a ritual called "dipo" (Boakye, 2010). In a study in which 1275 adolescent girls in Pakistan were asked about menstrual rituals, it was determined that half of the participants did not know where the origin of their menstrual blood came from and did not take a bath during this period (Ali & Rizvi, 2010). In another study conducted with 166 adolescent girls in Nepal, it was reported that all participants were subjected to religious isolation during the menstrual period, 5% perceived menstrual bleeding as a bad situation and 10% were isolated in animal shelters during the menarche period (Hamal & Susma, 2014). In a study conducted by UNESCO in African countries, it was determined that girls cannot reach hygienic practices and are deprived of hygiene materials, they use different absorbent materials for menstrual bleeding (e.g. dry leaves, dry waste, dung, animal skin, rag or toilet paper), and there is a lack of knowledge on menstrual hygiene (UNESCO, 2014). Similarly, it has been reported that menstruating women in India cannot access hygienic materials and more than 77% use different absorbent materials (an old cloth, newspaper, dried leaf and bark sand) for menstrual bleeding (Garg & Anand, 2015).

While taboos against menstruation are more common in underdeveloped and developing countries, it is known that this situation is less in developed countries and there are still norms for menstrual bleeding. It is known that women with menstrual bleeding in England have taboos against bathing, swimming and having

intercourse. In addition, menstrual bleeding is dirty and if a girl uses tampons during her period, she is stigmatized as not being a virgin (Tingle & Vora, 2018).

It can be said that there is a generally negative attitude towards menstrual bleeding in Turkish society. This negative attitude, cultural taboo and various beliefs cause not to speak openly and comfortably about menstruation, and the information obtained from the health care professional, family or environment is not always adequate and accurate. In our society, there are studies evaluating the perception and attitude towards menstrual bleeding, which is generally called "getting sick" or "getting dirty". In a study to determine the cultural behaviours and practices of 240 students studying in the midwifery department, 94.6% of the students stated that during the menstrual period, nail/hair should not be cut, epilation should not be performed, hajj/umrah prayers should not be performed, and 42.5% of the students thought that the menstrual period should be kept secret (Sakar, Özkan, Saraç, Atabey, & Nazbak, 2015). In another study conducted with 586 married women to determine the experiences, behaviours and attitudes of Turkish women of reproductive age towards menstrual bleeding, it was reported that 64.2% of the participants defined menarche as a negative experience, 48.8% could not tell their menstrual periods to anyone and a small portion of the participants saw menstrual bleeding as a punishment given by God (2.2%) (Çevirme, Çevirme, Karaoğlu, Uğurlu, & Korkmaz, 2010).

The effect of mass media (television, radio, internet, social media) is also very effective in the formation of negative perceptions and attitudes about menstrual bleeding (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013). Through these tools, menstrual bleeding is described as an invisible or negative situation (Fusaro, 2016). The fact that the menstrual hygiene products trapping scent, do not appear in clothing, small enough to be unobtrusively carried in a bag and representation of menstrual blood with a blue fluid in the advertisements give the society the perception that menstrual bleeding is a situation that should be embarrassed and hidden (Fusaro, 2016; Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013).

The Effect of Perceptions and Attitudes Towards Menstrual Bleeding on Women's Health

Health behaviours, habits and practices vary from society to society or from culture to culture. Menstrual bleeding and related issues are perceived as dirty or embarrassing situations that should not be discussed in both individual and social communication and should be kept secret. As a result of the lack of information added to the wrong beliefs and attitudes from the past, failure in the provision of health services related to women's health and various reproductive health problems arise (Patil et al., 2011). However, social isolation and stigmatization of menstruating women also cause psychological problems in addition to physiological problems (Maniar & Mehta, 2017). Many traditional practices and taboos surround normal physiological processes such as menarche. When the necessary scientific and correct information is not given about menstruation, which is one of the normal physiological processes in the growth and development process, as of pubertal period; the normality of the situation is not recognized and the distinction cannot be made between myth and reality (Patil et al., 2011).

Social stigma, taboos, legends and superstitions related to menstrual bleeding and menstruation cause many girls and women to practice dangerous hygiene practices. On the other hand, it is reported that infections related to the reproductive system are seen at a lower rate in women who have information about the scientific and hygienic health practices necessary to protect reproductive health (Maniar & Mehta, 2017).

CONCLUSION

Menstrual hygiene information and training constitute an important part of health education. Most menstrual practices have direct effects on reproductive health. It is known that attitudes towards menstrual practices that start and continue in the pubertal period continue throughout life. It can be said that perceiving negative situations such as pain and cramps that occur as a result of incomplete and wrong menstrual practices as normal may cause them to not be considered as a sign of an important health problem. Therefore, health care professionals working in primary health care have a key role in menstrual health. It is necessary to examine the menstrual practices of women as of the pubertal

period, to reveal health problems affecting their adaptation to reproductive life, and to develop health education strategies regarding menstruation, which has an important place in reproductive health. In addition, a biocultural approach may be recommended when offering culturally sensitive and medically appropriate treatments to women.

Author Contributions

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Conflict of Interest

The author declared that there was no conflict of interest in the conduct of the research.

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