

Study of Prevalent Maternal Beliefs Regarding Diet during Common Childhood Illness in Thar Desert, Rajasthan

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Abstract: A study was conducted in 17 villages of Thar Desert, categorized in three ecological sub-regions, i.e., Marusthali, Shekhawati and Luni basin. Information on maternal beliefs regarding diet during common childhood illness, demography and other socio-economic aspects was collected through interview techniques from 434 rural young mothers who represented the entire caste groups present. Majority of the women (94%) were illiterate, and 48% belonged to lower and upper middle-income groups. The respondents opined on the basis of their traditional beliefs, items preferred and restricted during different types of illness. Accordingly the food items were divided into cold, hot, light, windy, heavy and other characteristics. Cold food like curd with rice and turmeric were preferred during diarrhoea and dysentery, but hot food like millet and jaggery were avoided. During measles and typhoid only hot food like *lebta* of millet was preferred to hasten the appearance of rashes. Information on such local maternal beliefs regarding diet during common childhood illness in Thar Desert will help in organizing nutrition and health education programs for desert areas by encouraging the useful practices and discouraging the harmful ones.

Key words: Maternal belief, illness, diarrhea, seasons, windy food.

Malnutrition is a major health problem in the developing countries where poverty and lack of education are also prevalent. Restriction of diet during illness is a major factor of malnutrition. Some mothers feed while others avoid feeding during illness due to cultural beliefs (Gupta *et al.*, 1983; Singh, 1994). Their deep-seated traditional beliefs and their ignorance about the nutritional needs of the sick children are important causes of malnutrition (Kapil *et al.*, 1990). The practices are more prevalent in rural areas. Although studies have been conducted in different parts of the country, no information is available for Rajasthan in general and the desert in particular. An attempt has been made here to study the

dietary preferences and restrictions of food by rural mothers during common childhood illness.

Materials and Methods

The study was carried out in the rural household of Thar Desert and the target population was young women having pre-school children. As per 1994 data, the rural population in Thar Desert of Rajasthan was 1,39,62,000, settled in 12359 villages. The desert can be divided into three ecological zones. Zone-I (Marusthali region) consists of following districts: Jaisalmer, western part of Barmer, western part of Nagaur, Bikaner and western part of Churu. Zone- II (Shekhawati region) consists of the eastern

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