

# Social Myths & Taboos in Dentistry

*Hindol Das, Intern, Maitri College of Dentistry & Research Centre, Anjora, Chhattisgarh, India*

## Abstract

Lack of knowledge and awareness of people on oral health gave rise to innumerable social misbeliefs in certain communities. In today's world, it is important for every dentist to have knowledge of the trending myths and taboos in dentistry to provide quality dental care to the patients. This short review of literature discusses the various social misconceptions and commonly encountered taboos in dentistry and the reasons for such misbeliefs.

**Keywords:** Dental beliefs, Myths, Taboos, Culture

## Introduction

Every misconception is a poison originated from society's culture & religious interventions. No matter how carefully people choose their words, they'll always end up being twisted by others. A taboo can be defined as a vigorous proscription by the general public and population of a society or community against certain objects, words or actions that are considered unappealing and offensive.<sup>(1)</sup> Myths have become the part and parcel of everybody's life. They are false perceptions and fictitious stories beyond reality and a part of people's ethnic identity. Social myths and taboos have a significant effect on people's lifestyle and their approach on seeking medical and dental treatment during their illness.<sup>(2)</sup>

Despite the progress in the field of health, there are still isolated communities where people strictly follow their own cultural traditions, values & customs, and keep their myths intact.<sup>(3)</sup> They usually pass this misconceptions and beliefs from one generation to the next. Dentistry is not an exception when it comes to myths and taboos. Day in, day out dentists face myths and imaginary beliefs which has no relevance with the oral disease of the concerned patient.<sup>(4)</sup> Such taboos had a remarkable influence on the oral health of people and prevent such population from getting genuine dental care regardless of making it available for them.<sup>(5)</sup>

## Reasons for Misconceptions and Taboos

Myths and taboos are prevalent in the society due to a number of reasons such as illiteracy, poverty, lack of awareness, anxiety, apprehension, cultural beliefs, social misperceptions, religious beliefs, lack of faith in medical/dental practice, and negligence of quality medical infrastructure.<sup>(6)</sup> Taboos are most commonly found with lower income groups with lack of education and knowledge. Myths are also spread due to wrong information from people who had past history with a personal negative dental experience.<sup>(7)</sup>

In a developing country like India, it is challenging to render oral health services to the people where greater part of the country's population lives in rural areas with a very strong binding and influence of the myths and taboos. Rural people have greater cultural beliefs as compared to urban people. Most people have trust in spiritual therapy and alternative forms of medicine and believe in the treatment of traditional local practitioner than visiting a doctor.<sup>(8)</sup>

Age also plays an important role, as a majority of geriatric populations have strong traditional and social faith in myths throughout their life which expose their negative attitude and behaviour towards oral health as well as general health.<sup>(9)</sup>

### Common Myths and Taboos related to Dentistry: <sup>(10)</sup>

- Extraction of upper teeth causes loss of eyesight.
- Scaling causes loosening of teeth.
- Dental procedures are always painful.
- Females don't go to male dentist for treatment.
- Laal Dant Manjan powder is better than toothpaste for brushing of teeth.
- Improper brushing is the only cause for bad breath.
- Not to visit a dentist during fasting.
- No need of visiting a dentist if there is no significant problem with the teeth.
- Upper caste people don't go to lower caste dentists for treatment, with the fear of their religion getting spoiled.
- Presence of teeth at birth (natal teeth) is harmful to grandparents.
- Milk teeth need not be taken care as they will anyhow be replaced by permanent teeth.
- Wisdom teeth are associated with human intelligence.
- Teeth should be buried post-extraction.
- It is better not to brush the teeth when the gums bleed.
- Tooth pain subsides on keeping tobacco beside the painful tooth.
- Prosthetic teeth consists of natural teeth of other persons.
- Pregnant female should avoid dental procedures completely.
- Brushing once daily is sufficient for maintaining good oral hygiene.
- Spacing between front teeth is considered lucky.
- There is worm inside a decayed tooth that needs be pulled out to save the tooth.
- Staining of teeth is caused due to eating of brinjals. They blacken the teeth.
- Blowing of worms will prevent caries.
- Teeth are blackened to prevent caries.
- Cloves and supari is used to reduce tooth pain.
- Forwardly placed teeth are considered lucky.
- Fallen teeth of the child are thrown on the roof of the house in the presence of squirrel that leads to eruption of healthy permanent tooth. Squirrel takes the deciduous tooth and returns a new permanent tooth.
- Hard and vigorous brushing is the only way to clean the teeth.
- Gold crown in front tooth indicates that the person has visited Mecca.
- Zandu balm relieves tooth ache.
- Alum or slaked lime provides relief from mouth ulcers.
- Swelling in the mouth is subsided by application of hot fermentation.
- Teeth become stronger when cleaned with neem stick or salt.
- A child becomes a witch if born with teeth.

- To get stronger teeth, the lost tooth must be preserved beneath a stone after exfoliation/extraction.
- Removing tooth in a pregnant woman is dangerous.
- Tooth problems are not serious and can be neglected.
- There is no association of oral health with general health.
- Jains of North India consider taking injection as taboo; they get their teeth extracted without anesthetic injection.

## Conclusion

It is important for the dental professionals to understand the various social myths and taboos prevailing in dentistry since they act as hindrance towards seeking oral health care. Gradually with the progress of education, these beliefs and misconceptions are fading but still encountered quite frequently. It is the duty of the government, health care professionals, and public health personnels to impart health education and awareness among people so as to eradicate such fictitious myths and provide effective dental care.

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