

Complementary medicine causing severe side-effects in a child - an overlooked cause of weight loss?

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Background

Homeopathy system of medicine is traditionally considered to be one of the safest system of medicine, as the drugs are made from the dilution of the active ingredients [1]. But there are certain evidences available which support the fact that homeopathic medicines can cause severe adverse drug reaction (ADRs) in children [2,3]. It is very important to know the patient medication history to find out the presence of such incidences. The present case of a 5 year old child shows the presence of fever, loose motion and weight loss due to consumption of homeopathy medicine. It is very important to report such cases so that the physicians can be made aware regarding the ADRs pertaining to the use of alternative system of medicine.

Case presentation

A 5 year old girl presented at our outpatient clinic for fever, loose motion and weight loss. The initial workup was negative for common causes and she had received multiple antibiotics without any specific diagnosis. However none of the treatments were effective. A continuous measurement of the weight and fever were carried out. It was found that her body weight declined from 18 kg to 12 kg (30 % of total weight) with persistent fever of up to 102 F during the observation period of approximately 1 month. She was admitted and various diagnostic tests and cultures were performed to rule out the possibilities of HIV, typhoid, TB and other infectious & non infectious causes. All the tests performed were found negative. From the patient medication history it was found, that apart from the allopathic medicines, the patient was receiving homeopathic medicines for small hypopigmented patches on her right eyelid.

On retrospective review, the mother clearly appreciated that the symptoms of fever, loose motion and weight loss started soon after the start of homeopathic treatment. All the medicines were stopped & symptoms resolved soon after withdrawn of homeopathic medicine. Over the next 3 months the child gained all the lost weight and resumed normal activity. We conclude that the most reasonable explanation for the symptoms appears to be homeopathic medicines in this case, since the symptoms are very closely temporally associated with their use. Unfortunately, we were unable to find the name of the exact homeopathic medication used or its potency. No specific treatment is given. Antibiotic therapy and homeopathic treatment were stopped. The child was followed up for a period of one month on weekly basis, before admission, and later monthly for the next 6 months after discharge.

Discussion

Homeopathic medicine was found to be most likely causative agent for the present symptoms, because the symptoms were start observing soon afterwards the start of the homeopathic treatment. The possibility of all other known reasons for the symptoms was ruled out by the help of various examinations performed in the patients. The findings were further supported by the fact the patient start gaining weight as soon as these homeopathic medicines were withdrawn. Like all other medicines, homeopathic medicines may also produce

certain ADRs [4]. Hence it is very important for the clinicians & patients to be aware about possible ADRs due to the alternative system of medicine and always remember to ask the parents regarding use of alternative medications when taking a drug history.

The association between medicine and symptoms seen here could be due to chance. Also we are unaware of the exact homeopathic medication used, and a biological mechanism is thus difficult to explain. However, given the fact that the onset of diarrhea & weight loss corresponded to the initiation of treatment, extensive investigations failed to reveal any cause, and finally stopping the medication lead to a complete reversal of symptoms makes us believe that this was the likely offending agent.

The reason why this is an important issue is because we forget to ask details of CAM in our drug history, and many a times parents are reluctant to discuss these as well, feeling that this information may be irrelevant, or that we doctors may not appreciate the use of CAM. This case report highlights the importance of taking a complete medical history including CAM use in children with unexplained weight loss.

Conclusion

It is very important to find out the prior history of complementary or alternative medicine while taking medication history before reaching on any conclusion regarding diagnosis. As in present case a homeopathy drug used for vitiligo cause serious adverse drug reaction of loose motion, weight loss and persistent fever in a 6 Yrs old girl. Only limited evidence regarding the safety of alternative system of medicine are available publicly. It is highly recommended to carry out safety profiling study of alternative medicine used in Indian children to avoid repetition of such incidences.

References

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