



INFANT ORAL MUTILATION

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Infant Oral Mutilation

Infant Oral Mutilation is the technical name for a cultural practice prevalent in many parts of Africa, involving the removal of infant's healthy deciduous teeth.

Babies as young as six days old have these baby teeth removed from under their gums.

The practice of IOM is typically carried out with non sterile instruments like knives, sharpened bicycle spokes, hot poker or simply fingernails.

Over the past forty years a concerning cultural belief has been observed in parts of central eastern Africa in particular.

Why does it happen?

Parents are told that their infant's unerupted; soft white buds of the baby teeth are parasite worms which cause sickness and diarrhoea. These instances of illness are commonly caused by giving infants water from unsafe sources. The lack of education about basic general health and hygiene leads to ignorance and putting children in danger unnecessarily.

Why should we be concerned about it?

IOM causes considerable pain and suffering to the children on which it is carried out.

The practice leads to the deformation of the underlying adult teeth. It also leads to disfigurement of the mouth and face due to the damage to gums and permanent teeth.

The most serious consequences of IOM are life threatening infections such as septicaemia, tetanus and noma and lead to serious illness or death.

Who does it?

IOM is normally carried out by traditional village healers, community elders, priests and midwives operating in rural communities in parts of Africa. This is normally carried out for a fee. Sometimes however in desperation and unable to afford any kind of fee parents take it upon themselves to remove the baby teeth.

A deep rooted cultural belief

This is incredibly sad as it is a cultural belief that is so deep rooted that parents are in fact causing so much unnecessary harm and suffering to their children from ignorance of some simple facts of why the children get ill in the first place and that the baby teeth are in fact a normal and healthy part of a child's development.

How can we combat it?

What is needed is to raise awareness of the serious problems that accompany IOM and the dangers that it causes. Education of local healers and the general population in the countries in which IOM takes place is vital to end the practice. Key to success is unravelling the myths that surround cultural practices such as IOM. Changing such deep rooted cultural beliefs and practices is not easy however and

What can IOM learn from the case of Female Genital Mutilation?

The most similar case of an ingrained cultural belief is the practice of female genital mutilation or circumcision. This has gained huge amounts of publicity over the last ten years. Girls are subjected to horrendous genital mutilation carried out with razor blades or even pieces of glass in often very unsanitary conditions with no anaesthetic. This can result in death from septicaemia and shock or more often in long term reproductive problems.

This is a really good example of how dangerous mistaken beliefs can be. Girls who have not been circumcised are considered unclean and loose women in many cultures. There is even some fantastic folklore that says that if a man sleeps with an uncircumcised woman they will die if they touch her clitoris that has not been removed.

Education is really needed to end the belief in worms in the mouth that are actually really health baby teeth and that sleeping with an uncut girl can kill you.