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A review on historical aspect of vitiligo

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Abstract

Vitiligo is a common hypomelanotic disorder of skin characterized by circumscribed depigmented macules of different size. It is due to progressive loss of melanocytes from the affected area of skin. Multiple factors are responsible for the development of vitiliginous patches, like auto immunity and genetic factors. According to our various Unani atibba (Unani physicians) it is due to excess of khilt e balgham (phlegm) in blood, change in the temperament of skin and weakened quwatte mughaiyarah are the main cause behind this diseases. The description of this disease is also found in Vedas, Quran, Bible, Egyptian literature and in Persian literature which shows that vitiligo is not new for humans. Though it is also very much clear that no permanent cure is available till date. In this review we look at back and to bring the history of this disease in this paper.

Keywords: vitiligo, macules, quwwat-e-mughaiyarah, depigmented, khilt-e-balgham

Introduction

Vitiligo is a hypomelanotic disease characterized by white patches which can occur locally or these may present all over the body. Some time it is segmental or unilateral but usually multiple and symmetrical in distribution. It is a common skin disease which is usually having no other symptoms other than the discoloration of skin.

The term vitiligo is derived from the Latin word 'vitellus' which means veal which is spoken for pink meat of calve. It is to differentiate the meat from older cattle meat [9]. This term was first used in 1century CE. But some authors differ on this they say that the term is derived from the latin word 'vitium' which means fault or blemish. It is prevalent every where in the world so that no race is spared but its more common in black races as in Africans and asians. The worldwide prevalence is from 0.5% to 2% [16] some go to 3% [3]. But in some regions its more common as in India in some states is $\geq 4\%$ even upto 8.8%. The disease is not having any predilection to either sex. Family history is associated with vitiligo up to 20- 30% [7]. The apparent age of occurring the vitiligo is about 20 to 30 yrs.

Historical Description

As far as the historical description of the disease is concerned it is available in all sorts of ancient text like religious scriptures, historical books, community texts and in medicinal manuscripts. Here are some references we are mentioning about the antiquity of the disease which will may become useful for further exploration of causes and its treatments also.

Indian literature

For color of the skin people all over the world usually found to be very sensitive on this subjects that's why vitiligo or white patches over the body attracted much attention in all races and cultures. Almost all major religions are having the description of vitiligo in their religious scriptures. Earliest description of the vitiligo is found in classical literature of Indian medicine and religious scriptures. Rigveda which is considered to be the oldest of the vedas and thought to be of around 4000 years old mention the vitiligo as 'kilas'. The word 'kilsas' as described by Panini (around 700-500 BC) is derived from 'kil' means white or some thing that to be throw away. Here in this disease color of the skin thrown away by the skin so the name of the disease is 'kilas' or white color or patches. Atharvaveda 1400 BC 'shweta kushtha' was the term used for vitiligo at that time it was thought as the type of 'kushtha' or leprosy. As leprosy was considered as one of the deadliest diseases in ancient times and in vitiligo white patches are similar to the patches of leprosy so people at that time seems that this disease is a type of leprosy. There are one more word which is found in vedas is palita which means white patches and 'palita' means pale or white. Actually palita word derived from 'pal' means aged, old or grey which is associated with old age [15].

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Here in the vitiligo white hairs are found over patches now termed as leucotrichia [15]. Besides Vedas 'Manusmriti' the book is considered as code of conduct in Hinduism and which is around of 200 BC also mentioned this disease by the name of 'shweta kushtha' which literally means white leprosy. In 'charak samhita' which is a treatise of ayurveda mentioned this disease by the name of 'savitra' which means spreading whiteness [15, 18, 17, 20].

Islamic Texts

In Al Quran Islam's book of guidance in Arabic language which was revealed 1450 years before (600 AC) vitiligo is mentioned by the name of 'Bars'. Besides this in hadith literature which are the sayings of prophet Muhammad (PBUH) also mentioned this disease by the name of 'Bars' [1, 2].

Christian Texts

Original 'Bible' was in the Hebrew language, later on it was translated into Greek and other languages. The first translation was done by Ptolemy II in 250 BC. In the 13th chapter of the Bible ie the Leviticus the word 'tzaraat' used for white spots but various scholars are not sure whether this termed was used for vitiligo alone or leprosy [17, 20].

Egyptian Literature

Egyptians are the leaders among the ancient civilizations as well as in the field of medicine. Famous 'Ebers Papyrus' (1500 BC) which are manuscripts of Egyptian literature described the vitiligo with various treatment options. Eber's papyrus mentioned two types of skin diseases where changes in color occurs one is leprosy other is vitiligo. Former should not be touched and later is treatable [13, 14, 17, 20].

Persian literature

Persian civilization is having very rich heritage of medicinal literature. In tarikhe tibb e Iran which is of around 2200 BC in the period of Ashurians there was developed infrastructure of medicine. In the literature of that time description of vitiligo is available [11, 20].

Ancient Greece Literature

Famous Greek historian Herodotus (484-425 BC) said that patient of vitiligo had done some sins against the sun god. Which is the cause of vitiligo. There was a rule in the city that no leper or white skin disease men should enter the city and this is mentioned in one of his book named 'Clio' [11, 20].

Chinese Literature

Chinese medicine is one of the most famous alternative medicines which is used there over 1000 years mentioned vitiligo and its treatment clearly. Three medical terms used to described the vitiligo; Bai-Dian, Bai-Bo-Feng or Ban-Bo. For the treatment of vitiligo Chinese people used various herbs and acupuncture to treat the disease. in Chinese literature pubak is also described [11, 20].

Sui dynasty of China (618-626 CE) and Sung Dynasty (960-1279 CE) prepared medical literature in their regime which mentioned about hypopigmented disorders as well as vitiligo. They even classified the disease as localized and generalized [20].

Korean Literature

Korean literature also mentioned hypopigmented disorders in their famous medical compilation called 'Dongey Bogum'. They even described some therapies to treat these disorders. In 17th century Korean yi dynasty medical text book by Dongey Bogam also described vitiligo under the hypomelanosis where other white and pale patches also described eg tinia versicolor, albinism neavus depigmentosus and anaemicus [11, 14].

Mongolian and Japanese Literature

In 'Makatominoharai' Mongolian collections of prayer which is also called Shinto prayers it is mentioned about shirabito means whiteman referred to the diseased condition of skin that is referred to albinism or vitiligo [20].

In Japanese literatures 'Makatominahrahi' which is a collection of Shinto prayers termed this condition as 'shira bitu' which means white man and usually interpreted as 'vitiligo' [13, 20].

Classical Unani medicine Literature

During the medieval period unani hakims described this disease by the name of 'Bars'. They studied and treated this disease. Bars is mentioned and discussed in classical 'unani medical literature' clearly. Cause was ascertained according to humors (akhlat) and it also treated accordingly. Atibba the unani physicians considered this disease occurs due to derangement in khilte balgham which should be corrected by nuzj o istefrag. After removal of the deranged khilt they apply the local drugs also over the patches of vitiligo. 'Muhammir' drugs which produce hyperemia over skin after applying were used. Among the various drugs two famous drugs are atrilal and babchi. Former is Egyptian and later is Indian in origin. Hundreds of literary references are available for both of them [7, 8]. Besides this Egyptians, Indians and arabs also used sunlight after using psoralens [14, 21].

Contemporary Texts

Vitiligo word is first use by Celsus in his medical classics 'De medicina' which is in latin in 1st century AD. The word vitiligo derived from latin vituli which means 'calf' that is flesh. Some other authors said that it is derived from 'vitelus' itself which is a latin word for calf as white patches found over calf skin.

Even now we still not progress much as far as the etiology and treatment is concerned. Scientists not confirmed about the slowing down the melanogenesis but they indicate about involvement of some hormones and enzymes. They proposed several theories about the causes of vitiligo. Some says melanogenesis become The most common one is auto immune hypothesis which state that auto immunity is the cause of destruction of melanocytes at the site of vitiligenous patches. They also assert that vitiligo is present usually in those people who come across with any of the autoimmune disease or it may be found in their family. Treatment made a little bit progress but no curative treatment is yet available despite so much extensive researches. Common treatments include PUVA, PUVA Sol, NBUBV therapy, melanocytes transfer etc. [4, 6, 19].

Conclusion

Here we can say that the vitiligo is one of the most ancient of diseases which is mentioned extensively in classical medical, cultural and religious texts. The disease is still present around and untreatable yet. Hope that present historical review on this problem provide some points to think over it to rule out the cause as well as find its treatment in better way.

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