

Letter to the Editor

Poor Management of Scabies Among Female Residential Madrasa Students of Bangladesh Caused by Poor Hygiene

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Dear Editor,

Being a new-generation public health physician, I am currently involved in teaching & research (Trauma College of Health Science), I have been deeply contemplating the country's emerging public health issues both in urban and rural areas, over the past few years.

Focusing on my goal, I intend here to ascribe one of my latest in-depth observations and practical experience in conducting a short-term field survey on 'Scabies'- a highly contagious skin disease. This study was conducted in a purposively selected residential Islamic Education Institute (Madrasa) in Aaraihar, Narayanganj, Bangladesh at the end of 2023.

This study is supervised by Dr. Kazi Selim Anwar, Ex-Head, Ad-din Medical Research Unit (MRU) and receiving short-term practical training on clinical dermatology under Professor Kaniz Rahman, Associate Professor, Dermatology, Ad-din Women's Medical College & Hospital (AWMCH), Dhaka, Bangladesh, also the Co-supervisor of this project, I led the field survey team comprising 5 BSc research students (Dissertation Group) from Government College of Applied Human Science, under Dhaka University.

We conducted this survey randomly (systematic: nth sampling) and selected 230 students with a mean age (11 ± 3 years) from a female residential Madrasa Islamic Religious Education Institution) Al Jamiatul Islamia Darul

Quran Lil Banat, Araihar, to find out the age-specific prevalence of scabies among them, its detailed clinical manifestations, epidemiological instincts, and association of those parameters with respondents' nutritional status (based on anthropometric measurements).

Firstly, Scabies, caused by an ectoparasite called *Sarcoptes scabiei* var. *hominis* remains a highly contagious skin infection, the most parasitic skin infestation in humans. Many children and young adults are facing so many health problems due to this. Most of the health problems are:

1. Itching in inner burrows.
2. Itching worsens at night.
3. Inflamed bumps etc.¹

I am writing to call attention to the urgent problem of scabies in several madrasas across Bangladesh. Scabies is a skin condition caused by parasites (*Sarcoptes scabiei* var. *hominis*) that infest the skin, leading to intense itching and rashes. It is extremely contagious and often spreads quickly in crowded environments with poor sanitation facilities, such as those found in many madrasas.

Unfortunately, many of these religious schools lack basic sanitation facilities and proper awareness regarding personal hygiene and disease spread. This has led to a rapid spread of scabies among students, and if left untreated, can lead to more severe health complications. Moreover, the lack of awareness about scabies and their symptoms also leads to delayed diagnosis and treatment, enabling the disease to spread even further.

To address the problem, we visited a female madrasa in Narayanganj last October 23. Our goal was to clinically

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assess skin problems, give them prescriptions on the basis of clinical diagnosis, and assess their knowledge and understanding of nutrition. We also assessed their general nutritional condition. We followed a standard questionnaire to collect information and used proper tools to measure their height, weight, and mid-upper arm circumference (MUAC).

We visited a female madrasa situated at Araihaazar upazilla of Narayanganj district. They have about 230 students, among which 207 were present on the day. It is a qwami madrasa offering up to master level education, but most of the students are from junior or elementary level (nurani moktob). About 70% of the students live in the residential facility of the madrasa, meanwhile the rest reside at family homes in nearby areas. Non-residential students spend at least 8- 9 hours in the institute for class and studies.

General environment in the visited madrasa

Structurally, the madrasa is a single-story building with a central courtyard. Due to 'parda' system rooms only have open windows facing the courtyard. The courtyard also provides common washing and cleaning facilities and cloth drying rods. Most of the rooms lack proper natural lighting and ventilation. The same rooms are used for studying during the day and sleeping at night and after lunch. Folding beds, clothes, books, and all the other personal items are stored in common wall racks. Multiple students share the same folding beds. Students use the same string for clothes hanging indoors.

Scabies and other health problems

Among students, at least 60% were clinically diagnosed with symptoms of scabies and other skin problems. Most of them have never taken any treatment. Less than 50% of students have taken non-prescription treatments from pharmacies or alternative treatments like homeopathy. On the day of our visit, 200 prescriptions were given for various health problems. The madrasa authority was

requested to take the necessary steps to solve the health problems.

Nutrition

Our questionnaire had a different section to assess knowledge and attitude towards nutrition. Most of them had no basic knowledge about nutrition. Madrasa provides them 3 meals a day. The meal plan lacks proper nutrition. Many of the residential students bring curry and other snacks from their homes. There is a small shop inside the madrasa which sells mainly packaged snacks like candy, chocolate, chips, flavoured juices, etc. Abruptly 90% of students under the age of 10 years are used to eating this kind of packed snack.

Most of the students are unaware of the basic understanding of nutrition and nutritious foods. Though their curriculum has a very brief discussion on nutrition. We also had a small discussion about basic nutrition with them.

Their overall nutrition knowledge and food habits should be improved including more hygiene practices. To achieve that, more study and education programs should be conducted in this field. Also, massive reforms should be done in the structural conditions of the madrasas.

Conclusion

The government, local health authorities, and madrasa management must address this issue urgently. Many other studies have shown potential risks of scabies and other health problems in our country. Health education programs should be initiated, and funds should be allocated towards better infrastructure facilities including clean water and personal hygiene products. So, it can enable students to maintain proper hygiene and prevent the spread of scabies.

Reference

1. Scabies. Cleveland Clinic. 2024.