REVIEW ARTICLE

Nurturing Infants Exploring Ayurveda’s Holistic Approach to Care

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Ayurveda encompasses that a wide range of practices within pediatric care especially plays a pivotal role in nurturing infants by offering safe and effective approaches not only for disease treatment but also for maintaining overall health in this span of age. Acharyas offered their insights on all aspects of newborn and infant care, spanning from birth until the newborn’s complete stability.

Methods: This study was completed by gathering the knowledge from classical Ayurvedic literature, research articles, guidelines, and PubMed and MedLine databases.

Results and Discussion: This study investigates traditional Ayurvedic methods for infant care placing particular attention on evaluating the safety and effectiveness of these practices within the framework of neonatal and infant healthcare up to the age of 1 year.

Conclusion: Kaumarbhritya is seen as the first direct assistance provided by the science of Ayurveda to a newborn on his debut in this new world, directing him toward a healthy lifestyle in the future and bringing out the finest version of himself. This paper offers an overview of the literary contributions and historical traditional medical practices of healthcare in the domain of Balachikitsa mainly of neonatal and infancy period. The goal is to underscore the significance of research grounded in evidence and its integration into hidden principles concerning neonatal and infant issues described in Ayurveda.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ayurveda offers a comprehensive and holistic approach to care for neonates and infants, emphasizing the importance of understanding their unique constitution, providing a nurturing environment, incorporating natural remedies and practices, and fostering emotional and spiritual well-being from the earliest stages of life. In infancy period Ayurveda includes various preventive aspects, diagnostic methods, Bal-Panchakarma (penta bio purification methods in children) specially for disabled children, therapeutic approaches, preventing and managing genetic disorders in form of pre-conception, antenatal, postnatal counseling, and management. Ayurveda strongly advocates for appropriate care of the mother during both the prenatal and postnatal phases, ensuring the well-being of both the mother and the newborn from preconception to infancy. Recently, there has been an increasing interest in exploring holistic and traditional approaches to neonatal and infant care such as Navjata Shishu Paricharya, and Raksha karma (sterilization) and various kinds of Samskaras during neonatal and infancy period. These procedures aim to promote both the physiological and psychological development of neonates and infants enhancing their immunity and overall health. Recognizing the importance of investing in the early years of children is crucial for optimizing their future health and happiness.

During the neonatal and infancy period, the following practices can be regarded as optimal for fostering a joyful and fulfilling experience from birth to 1 year of age:

1.1. Preconceptional Care

The creation of the embryo is credited to the combination of sperm (Shukra) and ovum (Shonita). Several essential factors such as
ovulation (Ritukala), the condition of the reproductive system (Kshetra), the quality of ovum and sperm (Bija), nourishing substances (Ambu), and the proper functioning of downward bodily air (Apana Vayu) are pivotal for a healthy conception. Punsavana Samskara,[1] an Ayurvedic practice similar to genetic engineering, is employed to ensure the birth of robust offspring. Typically performed between the 8th and 11th weeks of pregnancy, this distinctive procedure aims to enhance the health of the unborn child. Simantonnayan Samskara,[2] conducted in the 4th month of pregnancy, addresses hormonal fluctuations and emotional imbalance experienced by women. To foster positive emotions and thoughts, a ritual called Homa is carried out during Simantonnayan Samskara, influencing the mental state of the unborn child to resonate with the mother’s positive mindset during pregnancy.

1.2. New Born Care (Navjita Shishu Paricharya)
Immediate postnatal care, such as Ulavaparimarjana,[3] entails removing vernix caseosa right after birth. It’s advised to apply a blend of Ghee and Saindhava Ghrita to the infant’s skin as Ghee, being a poor conductor of heat, provides ample insulation against hypothermia. Pranpratayayaman[3] is the process of reviving a newborn by clearing the airway to ensure unimpeded breathing. Essentially, it stimulates the central nervous system akin to tactile stimulation. Nabhinilkartan (cutting of umbilical cord) pertains to the severing of the umbilical cord. Acharya Vagbhhat recommended cutting the umbilical cord with a sharp instrument known as Ardhadhara Shastra (single edged knife) and tying it at two points, spaced 4 Anguli (approx. 7 cm) apart, using silk threads called Kshoumasutras (silk thread). The remaining part of the cord should be looped around the neonate’s neck to prevent blood loss. Mukhrishodhana,[3] similar to suctioning in neonatal resuscitation, involves the use of Saindhava and Sarpi to effectively clear secretions from the mouth. In general care, Snana (bathing) helps reduce the risk of hypothermia. This is accomplished by utilizing Ushodhana, a blend of warm water infused with extracts from diverse aromatic plants or fragrance-emitting substances. These extracts are obtained by immersing heated metal bars of gold or silver, which also helps mitigate the usual odor associated with labor. Ksheerivriksha (special group of medicated plants) Kashaya, renowned for its potent antiseptic characteristics, efficiently protects the baby against infections.

1.3. Varnious Samskaras
Samskaras[4] are rituals conducted with the aim of instilling positive qualities in an individual. They encompass Jatakarma[5] (birth rituals), Namkarana[6] (naming ceremony) during the neonatal period, and Nishkrmananda[7] (first exposure of child to the external environment), Phalaprashana[7] (first exposure of fruit juices to child), Anprashana[7] (first exposure of food to child), and Karnavedhana[8] (piercing of ear lobes) during infancy. Jatakarma initiates the first Prashanam (licking of medication), where the baby ingests a mixture of honey and Ghee processed with mantras, followed by Stanapanam, or breastfeeding. The initial feeding with Madhu and Ghrita provides ample stimulation to the gastrointestinal intrinsic nerve plexus, facilitating the early passage of meconium and indicating rooting, sucking, and swallowing reflexes. Namkarana Samskara, or the naming ceremony, as described by Acharya Charaka, occurs on the 10th day of life, signifying the beginning of the late neonatal period. The father of the child should assign two names, one reflecting the constellation under which the baby is born (Naksatra), and the other carrying intended meaning (Abhikripayika). The Nishkranana Samskara typically occurs between the 12th day and the 4th month after birth, providing an opportune moment to check for any deformities when the child reaches 4 months of age. Both Phalaprashana and Annaprashana Samskaras play significant roles in the child’s life.[5] Before these ceremonies, the child exclusively receives milk. According to Kashyapa, the 6th month is designated for Phalaprashana, while the 10th month is for Annaprashana.[7] By the age of 6 months, breast milk alone may not suffice to meet the growing child’s nutritional needs. Hence, it is the appropriate time to introduce supplementary feeding, beginning with Phalaprashana and then Annaprashana. These samskaras help mitigate deficiencies in essential vitamins. Karnavedhana Samskara, or the piercing of the ear lobe, is typically performed when the child is between 6 and 8 months old. Acharya Sushruta pierces a child’s ear with the dual purpose of Rakshanimit (disease protection) and Abhushanarthta (ornamentation). This practice seems to enhance the strengthening of the immune system by inducing injury to the ear lobules, which initiates antigen-antibody reactions during early life, leading to secondary immunization against various infections.

1.4. Breastfeeding (Concept of Dhatri)[9]
The practice of exclusive breastfeeding for a minimum of 6 months provides numerous advantages for both the infant and the mother. Foremost among these is the enhancement of immunity against gastrointestinal infections. If the mother is unable to produce a sufficient quantity of milk, Ayurveda suggests considering the benefits of Dhatri (wet nurse) for the child.[10] According to Acharya Charaka,[11] a wet nurse should possess specific desirable qualities such as having a healthy complexion (Samana Varna), already having a living child (Jivitvatsha), and having a sufficient quantity of breast milk. In addition, the wet nurse should use one of the Pragjyotihapana (drugs which stabilize new born care) drugs such as Aindri and Brahmi, as recommended. Acharya Vaghbhat[12] recommended either arranging for two wet nurses or providing the child with goat or cow’s milk after treating it with a decoction of Lagha Panchmoolaa (group of plants whose roots are used) mixed with sugar. Artificially produced milk should not be substituted for breast milk or any other form of milk unless absolutely necessary.

1.5. Preventive Approaches (Dhupana)[13] and Raksha Karma[14]
To uphold aseptic conditions, different sterilization techniques are employed, including Dhupana (medicated foaming) with Rakshogna (antimicrobial drugs) Dravyas such as Guggulu (Comiphora Mukku), which contains volatile oils extracted from its gum resin. Certain extracts demonstrated notable bacteria-inhibiting properties even when used in low concentrations.[19] Acharya Kashyapa has detailed the Dhupa Kalpa, a chapter focusing on various formulations for Dhupana of Vastras (cloths), Kumaragara (pediatric ward), and other items. Disinfecting the Kumaragara, or pediatric ward, aims to shield neonates from diverse compound infections. This process involves employing natural biocides and fumigants as recommended in classical texts.[20] Kumaragara, also known as the Neonatal Care Unit or Pediatric Ward, is a dedicated space or room designed specifically for neonates or infants. It is essential for the Kumaragara to possess desirable attributes such as being expertly constructed according to Vastu Vidhya (knowledge of dwelling), among other considerations. Kridabhum or playground, is an integral part of the Kumaragara (Neonatal Care Unit/Pediatric Ward), designed as a separate room with a level surface for children to play on. The Kridabhum should fulfill
various requirements, such as having designated areas for water and other spreadable substances, known as Salila Uloopkhalala Sthana. It is crucial to avoid prolonged sitting for children to prevent complications often associated with extended periods of sitting. The Kumaraagara should be well equipped with various sorts of Kridnaka. Toys for children, referred to as Kridnaka, should possess diverse qualities such as offering a wide range of attractive varieties (Vichitrani) and producing various types of melodious sounds (Ghoshavantyaha). Kumaraadahara or guardian/babysitter, as described in Ashataka Sangrah, is characterized by qualities such as Bala Chittavata, that is, indicating mastery in understanding the child’s mentality.

1.6. Diagnostic Approaches (Concepts of Vednaadhyaya[22] and Lakshnadsdyaya[23])

The wealth of experiences and numerous observations gathered by Acharya Kashyapa continue to be immensely valuable in today’s clinical practice. His delineations of signs and symptoms of illnesses stand alongside those found in modern pediatrics. In the Vednaadhyaya of Kashyapa Sambhita, a comprehensive symptomatology of numerous diseases is presented, which closely resembles contemporary symptomatology. In addition, the Lakshnadsdyaya provides an elaborate clinical examination protocol spanning from newborns to adolescence, including prognostic insights for the future. Kashyapa refers to neonates as Balanam Avachasa,[24] meaning those unable to articulate their suffering verbally. In Vedana Adhyaya, Kashyapa provides numerous helpful guidelines for diagnosing diseases in such non-verbal children. They must convey all their discomfort, pain, and needs through minimal symptoms. A study of Vednadsdyaya underscores the depth and simplicity of Acharya Kashyapa’s therapeutic insights. Furthermore, Kashyapa elaborates on Lakshnadsdyaya, where examination begins from the feet and extends to the scalp hair of newborns through adolescence. He details physical features of nails and various body parts, along with future predictions, which provide insights into their health, wealth, and social and family circumstances. This aids in the early detection of potential clinical issues.

1.7. Therapeutic Contribution

Immunomodulation through Lehana[25] (medicated licking) and Prakara Yogas (group of medicines)[26] represents an appealing strategy using Rasayana drugs (immunomodulators) to enhance the immune response against pathogens by nonspecifically activating the immune system. Lehana, a potential prophylactic and therapeutic treatment, involves mixing drugs with honey or Ghrita and administering them from infancy to childhood. Suvarnaprashana (medicated drug licking along with gold), a unique health supplement, is considered a Rasayana due to its nutritional properties. Animal studies on Suvarna Bhasma have demonstrated its immune-stimulant, analgesic, and antidepressant effects. Prakara Yoga recipes serve as an effective measure for baby care starting from childbirth. Prakara Yoga, an indigenous approach, aims to boost body immunity, shielding children from diseases much like a fence protects a house from enemies from birth until they reach 12 years of age. The formulations primarily consist of ingredients with Katu rasa (bitter taste), Katu Tipaka (bitter ripening), and Laghu guna (light to assimilate) qualities, which help alleviate Kapha imbalance. Prakara Yogas, with their digestive, carminative, channel-clearing, and Rasayana properties, work to prevent illness during the neonatal and infancy stages. Acharya Kashyapa and various other scholars have made significant contributions to the field of pediatric medicine. They introduced various pediatric diseases and treatments, such as administering Abhyanga (massage) with coconut milk and bathing the infant with water boiled with tender leaves of Vata (Ficus benghalensis) for a healthy baby.[27] Acharya Kashyapa’s contributions to medical care and Pancharakarma in infancy include detailing eight types of Swedana Karma (sudation), with certain modifications such as Hastha Sweda (sudation of hands) and Pata Sweda (sudation of thighs), which are particularly beneficial for neonates and infants, especially in cases of abdominal pain. Basti (mediated enema) is recommended for children and considered akin to nectar for the well-being of child.[28]

1.8. Socializing and Ideal Parenting

Socialization plays a crucial role in various aspects of a child’s early development. As children mature, they gradually learn to recognize and understand their own thoughts and emotions. They also become adept at discerning the emotions of others, distinguishing between happiness and sadness, for instance. Moreover, they acquire skills to cope with stress, resolve conflicts, and integrate into their environment by engaging in communication and interaction with those around them. The family plays a huge role in a child’s socialization.[29] The family’s shared values, behaviors, and beliefs significantly shape a child’s early experiences. According to Ayurveda, adherence to codes of conduct known as Achara Rasayan (general routine of a person) helps prevent the imbalance of Doshas, thereby averting the onset of disease, as the imbalance of Doshas is considered the root cause of illness. Raising children involves more than just providing for their needs; it also entails practicing effective parenting techniques. There is not a single correct approach to good parenting, but guiding the child along the right path is a defining aspect of ideal parenting.[30]

2. DISCUSSION

The infancy period, spanning from birth to 12 months marks a critical stage in a newborn’s life as they transition from the security of the mother’s womb to the potential vulnerabilities of their new environment. It is imperative to establish a robust immune system during this phase to fortify the infant’s body against various infections and diseases. Ayurveda proposes diverse methods to enhance immunity and strengthen the body, aiding the infant in adapting to their surroundings. Suvarnaprashanam, an Ayurvedic immunization program utilizing a readily absorbable form of gold, represents an effective method to enhance immunity and deter recurring infections and allergic reactions. This regimen can be administered regularly from infancy to the age of 12, providing substantial health advantages. Suvarnaprasanam has shown notable anti-stress and analgesic characteristics, effectively lowering the levels of neurotransmitters such as 5-hydroxytryptamine, cortisone, nor-adrenaline, and dopamine.[31]

3. CONCLUSION

Motherhood is a remarkable period in a woman’s life, and her understanding of Ayurveda childcare practices can greatly enhance the physical and mental health of her child. The establishment of a well-equipped labor room like Sutikagara (labor room explained in Ayurveda), which ensures safe and comfortable childbirth, is truly commendable. After the child’s birth, thorough discussions on various aspects of care, including umbilical cord cutting, body cleansing, and resuscitation, are carried out in a systematic manner, emphasizing a scientific approach. Furthermore, there is a focus on upholding complete aseptic conditions during the care of both the mother and the newborn, which includes
the utilization of prescribed medicated smokes and adorning the room with specific medicinal substances.

Intriguing instructions are offered concerning the timing of the child’s physical and mental development, outlined across various Samskaras, along with the crucial characteristics of environments suitable for the child, bathing protocols, feeding routines, dressing procedures, and more, as delineated within the concept of Kumaragara (pediatric ward). Kridnaka, comprising an assortment of toys, must be attractive to children, taking into account their physical and mental immaturity.

However, it is vital that these items are safe for them to use. Ensuring proper immunity through suitable immunization is crucial for a child’s healthy development and a life free from illness.

For instance, Suvarnaprashana entails the oral administration of gold powder and specific medications to enhance the child’s strength (Bala), complexion (Varna), longevity (Ayu), and other desirable qualities, highlighting the priority placed on child safety and health.

4. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
Nil.

5. AUTHORS’ CONTRIBUTIONS
All the authors contributed equally to the design and execution of the article.

6. FUNDING
Nil.

7. ETHICAL APPROVALS
The study not required ethical permission as it is a review study.

8. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST
Nil.

9. DATA AVAILABILITY
This is an original manuscript, and all data are available for only review purposes from the principal investigators.

10. PUBLISHERS NOTE
This journal remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published institutional affiliations.

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How to cite this article: Kumar A, Sharma BD, Ojha NK. Nurturing Infants Exploring Ayurveda’s Holistic Approach to Care. IRJAY. [online] 2024;7(4):50-54.
Available from: https://irjay.com
DOI link- https://doi.org/10.48165/IRJAY.2024.70409