Main topic

A study of the history of child abuse

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Abstract. From ancient times to the present, many societies have practiced child abuse for various reasons. In this study, documents related to child abuse, scriptures, publications on medical history, ethics, sociology, anthropology, art history, mosaics in the Kariye Museum, and pictures from the Topkapı Museum in Istanbul were reviewed. The first miniature picture of an albino “Zal” was found and his story is presented briefly, and a mosaic representation of the story of the nationwide infanticide of King Herod was found in the ceiling of the Kariye Museum in Istanbul. It can be concluded that the abuse of female infants, illegitimate children, and malformed neonates was predominant. According to the results of this study, pediatric surgeons can benefit from a look at the history of child abuse in order to handle this problem adequately.

Key words: Child abuse – History of child abuse – Infanticide

Introduction

This paper could not have been written 100 years ago. Child abuse is not a recent practice: many ancient books contain frequent accounts of child abuse, but the recognition of the child as a unique organism did not develop until recently. Thus, people practiced many forms of child abuse without being aware of it.

In this paper, we have tried to briefly describe the story of the concept of child abuse in various societies by giving examples and tracing child abuse cases in order to investigate the history of child abuse and draw lessons from the historical events concerning this problem.

Infanticide

Since the beginning of history, many forms of infanticide have been practiced. In ancient Greece, fathers were permitted to practice infanticide. Many infants and neonates who had any serious malformations were killed in order to preserve the race characteristics. The best known example is the practice of Sparta, where children regarded as physically handicapped, after examination by a committee of tribal elders, were killed by exposure [11, 21, 24]. Soranus, a Greek physician of the 2nd century, advised midwives to examine each child at birth and get rid of those not fit to be raised [21, 24]. In numerous tribes worldwide, infanticide was practiced. In some tribes in Australia, twins were killed as unnatural. This practice can be explained in part by the natives’ dread of everything uncommon or rare [11].

Legitimacy of infants was also a worldwide problem. Illegitimate children were abandoned in ancient Greece [11]. To determine fitness to live and testify to legitimacy the Celts would plunge the newborn into an icy river. If the baby was strong enough and legitimate, he would float; otherwise he would die [3, 11, 24]. In Scotland and India, the birth of twins was regarded as a misfortune to be ashamed of. In Scotland mothers of twins were convicted for unfaithfulness, being accused of having had sexual intercourse with two different men [11]. Figure 1, from a
In various societies, infanticide was practiced for economic reasons. In India and China infants, especially females, were exposed or killed, particularly in severe summers and difficult economic situations [11, 25]. Throughout the history of humanity, girls were especially at risk as they usually were not considered equally worthy of living as their brothers. Children, especially girls, were sold by their parents for economic reasons. In the Arab society of the pre-Islamic era, daughters were regarded as shameful for fathers and were sometimes buried alive for economic reasons [22, 23, 29]. Among Koniagas, a tribe of the Pacific coast, girls were often taken to the wilderness, where their mouths were stuffed with grass, and left to perish [11]. At the beginning of the 19th century, in some parts of England the value of a baby was not more than a couple of pennies. Parents sometimes killed their babies and sold their new clothes in order to buy a glass of gin [18].

In mythology and history books examples of cannibalistic child abuse for traditional reasons are found. Fear of the son overpowering the father occurs extensively in Greek mythology. Zeus himself was fortunate to have survived, as an oracle told his father Cronus that he would be dethroned by one of his children, so that Cronus proceeded to swallow each of his children at birth. His unfortunate wife Rhea hid Zeus when he was born and instead presented her husband with a large stone wrapped in swaddling clothes, which he swallowed. Zeus was later to vanquish his father by giving him an emetic and forcing him to bring up the stone and all of his ingested children [9, 12, 26]. There are childrens stories concerning cannibalism: the Grimm tale of Snow White is a typical example. In this story, the foster mother of Snow White wants to eat the heart and liver of the child in order to get her strength, beauty, and youth. According to Mackenzie and McGilivary [11], in some parts of Australia infants were eaten, especially in severe summers, by their parents or brothers. Mandieta reported from Vera Cruz that in the Totanac societies, every 3 years children were killed and the blood from their hearts was mixed with certain plants and eaten by young men and women [11].

In some ancient tribes, especially a Jewish tribe called Malech, children were traditionally sacrificed for God [11]. In the well-known scriptural story, Abraham intended to sacrifice his son Isaac for God [11, 20, 28]. Figure 2 shows a 6th century fresco from the Byzantine Church of San Vitale in Ravenna depicting this sacrifice. Mass sacrifice of children was common among the Central American tribes; children were sacrificed to the rain god Quateot to induce rainfall [11].

In the scriptures there are many stories of children’s slaughter for superstitious reasons, the best known being the order of the Pharaoh that all newborn Jewish males should be killed [19, 25] and the nationwide infanticide by King Herod [16, 25]. After Herod was told that the