LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Leech in the Throat: A Well-known Ancient and Medieval Case of Pharyngeal Bleeding

Mohammadali M. Shojaa,1, Majid Khalilii, Marios Loukas3, R. Shane Tubbs3

1Section of Pediatric Neurosurgery, Children’s Hospital Birmingham, Alabama, USA
2Medical Philosophy and History Research Center, Tabriz University of Medical Sciences, Tabriz, Iran
3Department of Anatomical Sciences, St. George’s University, Grenada, West Indies

Dear Editors,

In a recent report published in Otolaryngology - Head and Neck Surgery, Drs. Ugur and Gunduz have described a patient with intermittent epistaxis who was found to have a leech attached to his nasopharynx.1 The case is very interesting as the complication is quite uncommon in recent times but probably was a common scenario in ancient and medieval clinical practice. The ancient Greek physicians had noted the pathogenic and therapeutic properties of leeches. According to Prioreschi, Hippocrates described a patient with mouth bleeding who had a leech stuck to his/her throat.2 In his Liber Continens (Kitab al-Hawi fi al-Tibb), Rhazes quoted Galen as describing leech infestation of the throat as a cause of hemoptysis, hematemesis and suffocation. Galen noted that leeches could remain asymptomatic in the throat, becoming enlarged and accidentally or suddenly ruptured following head trauma. The clues for this scenario were a history of drinking from leech-infested water and painless mouth bleeding following head trauma. In such cases, Galen recommended strong emetics to expel the leech. Other writers later appreciated the scenario of leech-related pharyngeal bleeding and similar description was appeared in other medieval texts such as the Liber Regius (Kitab al-Maliki) of Haly Abbas.

REFERENCES