

# Plica Neuropathica (Polonica) – A Matter of Faith

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## Abstract

Plica neuropathica, also known as plicapolonica, is an uncommon condition in which groups of hair are matted together to form a malodorous, irregularly twisted and irreversibly entangled mass. Predisposing factors include kinky hair, use of shampoos, febrile illness, psychological disturbances, poor hygiene. We report a case of plica neuropathica which was due to personal choice of the patient on account of his religious and spiritual beliefs and therefore any treatment for the same was refused.

**Keywords:** Neuropathica, Plica, Polonica, Religious

## INTRODUCTION

Plica neuropathica is an uncommon condition that presents as a compact mass of scalp hair with irregular twists and irreversibly entangled plaits, which are firm to hard impenetrable masses of keratin cemented together with dirt and exudates.<sup>1</sup> The older name is Plicapolonica since it was prevalent in Poland in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Though it is an uncommon condition in the general population, however people belonging to certain religious sects in India encourage this habit due to their religious beliefs. We report one such case of Plica neuropathica which was due to faith and personal choice of the patient.

## CASE REPORT

A 67 yr old male was admitted in the surgery department for abdominal wall cellulitis. He was a known diabetic but his sugar levels were under control with oral hypoglycaemics. He also was a known case of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease for which he was taking bronchodilators. His routine investigations at the time of admission were within normal limits. He had itching in his groins for which a dermatology consultation was sought. On examination of the patient it was found out that he had erythematous annular plaques in his groins for which a KOH exam was done; it came out positive for dermatophytosis and appropriate therapy started. On routine examination of the body it was revealed that he had matted, entangled hair with a peculiar odour,

the length of the tangled hair was several feet long which he tightly coiled into a bun under a saffron coloured turban. There was no underlying erythema or scaling and secondary bacterial infection was not present, however few nits were present. On further questioning he declared himself to be an important leader of a religious sect, who had not cut or combed his hair since childhood although he claimed to wash his hair twice a week. He gave no history of use of soap or shampoo. On further prodding he admitted to the use of herbs, camphor, ash to achieve the desired effect.

Since the patient was emphatic that he did not want any treatment for his scalp due to religious reasons, treatment was given only for his fungal infection in his groins.

## DISCUSSION

The term “Plica neuropathica” was first used by Le Page in 1884 to describe a case of sudden onset entangled hair in a patient with hysteria.<sup>2</sup> Le Page attributed this to nerve force while the child’s parents considered it as a visitation from God. Plicapolonica was a common condition of the scalp hair in Poland in 19<sup>th</sup> century due to deficient care of the hair. Polish custom of wearing tight fur caps and superstitious belief that a lousy scalp was healthy contributed to increased frequency in Poland.<sup>3</sup> The exact etiopathogenesis of plica neuropathica is unknown; vigorous friction, frequent use of harsh shampoos leading to longitudinal splitting and weathering of hair shaft, poor hair care/neglect resulting in

scalp infestations and pyodermas are the reasons postulated.<sup>4</sup> It has been seen following irritant contact dermatitis of the scalp,<sup>5</sup> psychological disturbances,<sup>1</sup> following azathioprine induced pancytopenia.<sup>6</sup> Other factors are use of certain shampoos<sup>7</sup> and natural kinks in the hair.<sup>8</sup>

The scalp hair has been a prime target of superstitious beliefs all over the world. In India, the first records of plica neuropathica or dreadlocks dates back to 2500 BC with the Hindu deity Shiva and his followers as reported in the Vedic scriptures as “JaTaa” meaning twisted locks of hair. In our culture it is a common religious custom to raise a plica for wish fulfillment or to have divine image in the public. The common superstition is that it cures internal illness and cutting it would bring ill health. It is commonly observed among religious “sadhus” of certain religions who have chronic unkempt hair and as has been suggested,<sup>8</sup> it could be produced by application of tar, pitch or wax by those people in the mosque with faith in the statuary influence of a plica. In our case also, the patient was using a mixture of herbs, camphor and ash to get the desired effect. Long hair when not combed or cut, entangles together to twisted masses of matted ropes of hair known as dreadlocks just as seen in our patient who had not cut or combed his hair since many years. People with dreadlocks wash their hair frequently contrary to popular belief. Our patient also used to wash his hair twice a week. Treatment of plica neuropathica involves cutting the matted hair; prevention includes hair care measures like regular cleaning of hair with mild cleanser or shampoo, avoiding backcombing.<sup>4</sup> However our patient did not want any treatment as it was a matter of faith for him. He believed that if hair is knotted, the energy remained within the hair and the body keeping a person strong and healthy and he also believed he would develop supernatural mental and spiritual powers. Dreadlocks are universally symbolic of a spiritualists understanding that vanity and physical appearances are unimportant. So, although plicapolonica is uncommon in general population in India, its prevalence among religious sadhus and sadhvis is relatively high.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, we would like to state that although plica neuropathica is seen usually with some underlying psychological problem or hair care neglect, some cases have a religious and spiritual basis for which treatment is usually denied.



Figure 1: Patient with long, entangled masses of hair



Figure 2: Patient, while standing showing entangled masses of hair longer than him

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