

## **DO RITUALS VIOLATE THE RIGHTS OF THE MENTALLY ILL PATIENT?**

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Health seeking behaviour of Sri Lankan psychiatric patients is influenced by traditional practice and cultural belief. In most cases, family members subject their sick for ritual management. However, these rituals involve rigorous physical procedures which could be abusive, thus, leading to violation of rights of the individual. This study therefore, aims to identify violations of rights, ethical issues and medico legal implications of ritual management of the psychiatric patient. Initially, the findings from the assessment of two cases referred to the Psychiatric Unit of the Teaching Hospital, Peradeniya are presented here.

The first case is that of a 35 year old female who presented with a history suggestive of depression, hospitalized subsequently and was treated accordingly. Physical examination of the patient showed several 5-6 cm long, healed, linear abrasions over the scapulae on both sides. On questioning it was revealed that she was forced to undergo a ritual against her will. In this process she was physically assaulted by the "Sharman" with the inflorescence of the areca nut tree. The second case is a 35 year old widow, presented with severe depression, after being subjected to a severe abusive ritual. She was physically restrained by six men, neglecting her cry for help, was forced to hold burning camphor until it was completely burnt off. This treatment was performed with the proxy consent of her family, against her will. In both the cases visible injuries matched the history provided.

It was observed that both patients were in sound mind at the time of the ritual. The physical abuse worsened their condition. Thus, this procedure deviated from notions of 'non maleficence' and 'beneficence', thereby, elucidating gross violation of professional ethics. In addition there is no validity of "proxy consent" of a mentally sound adult when medico-legal issues are considered.

Rituals performed against the will of patients have violated their rights on the aspect of autonomy, right to freedom from torture or abuse, right to best possible care, right to well being and dignity. However, to make definitive conclusions more cases have to be examined. It is worthwhile commenting that the analysis was done from a western ethical perspective and the Asian ethical perspective may contend in a different manner.