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Review Article

Cupping therapy (Hijamah) in Saudi Arabia:
from control to integrationMohamed K.M. Khalil^{a,*}, Sulaiman Al-Eidi^a, Meshary Al-Qaed^a, Saud
AlSanad^{a,b}^a National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine – Ministry of Health, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia^b College of Medicine, Al Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University (IMSIU), Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT

Cupping therapy or Hijamah is a leading traditional practice after spiritual healings and herbal medicine in Saudi Arabia. Wet cupping is by far the most common type of cupping therapy. Hijamah in Saudi Arabia and other Muslim countries is a model of religious influences, interconnectivity, and cross-cultural influences between different civilizations. Accordingly, differentiating the cupping practiced in Saudi Arabia, and other Muslims societies from that practiced in other countries like China, by Korea only by the technique or cupping sites is an underestimation of the differences. In Saudi Arabia, the profile or characteristics of cupping therapy user is distinct from the profile of other traditional medicine users by being more educated, with higher job rank and not affected by nationality or gender. After an era of unregulated practice, cupping therapy is currently regulated and monitored by the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine in the Ministry of Health (NCCAM/MOH) of Saudi Arabia. Regulations and licensing include practitioners, practice place, and cupping equipment. After regulation, cupping is mainly offered by the private sector and paid directly by the client as insurance does not cover it. In the private sector, licensed cupping service is usually provided as a parallel and not an integrated service. However, there are few models of integrated cupping clinic in universities, academic institutions, and governmental hospitals. Further health system research is needed to develop more models of integrated cupping service pending for the healthcare transformation which is going on in Saudi Arabia.

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* Corresponding author at: National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, P.O. Box 88300, Riyadh 11662, Saudi Arabia.

E-mail addresses: statkhl@hotmail.com, m.khalil@nccam.gov.sa (M.K.M. Khalil).

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1. Introduction

Traditional medicine (TM) is widely used in Saudi Arabia. Interest in traditional and complementary medicine (T&CM) has grown considerably in recent years not only among the public, but also among medical professions, decision makers, and researchers in Saudi Arabia.¹⁻⁴ In the absence of a national survey, multiple regional surveys showed that TM use is ranging from 60 to 75%.⁵⁻⁷ Religious healings, herbal medicine, cupping therapy, and the healing with honey are the leading four therapies respectively in TM in Saudi Arabia.^{1,6} There is no Traditional Healing System similar to China, Korea, Japan, or India. However, the term "Traditional Arabic and Islamic Medicine" (TAIM) is used in Saudi Arabia like other regional and Arab countries to refer to a group of healing therapies practiced in the Arab and Islamic world within the context of religious influences of Islam.⁸ TAIM represents the interconnectivity between the Islamic medical influences and the regional healing practices emerging from different geographical and cultural origin including the Traditional Chinese Medicine, Ayurvedic, Unani and Persian therapies.⁹ The influences of Islamic religion or Prophetic traditions may promote or discourage the use of specific traditional practices imported from other cultures.^{10,11} Cupping therapy or Hijamah in Saudi Arabia and other Muslim countries is a model for this interconnectivity and cross-cultural influence.

2. The influence of religion and prophetic traditions on cupping therapy (Hijamah)

In traditional Arabian medicine, Hijamah means sucking (cupping), and it includes wet and dry cupping, but in Arabian culture, Hijamah usually refers to wet cupping.¹² Hijamah is performed by Muslims as it is a form of medicine specifically mentioned and encouraged by the prophet of Islam "Muhammad." Among other narratives "hadith", the prophet said that "Hijamah is the best of your remedies".¹²

Although there is a confusion between the term "Islamic medicine "and Prophetic Medicine", Muslim historians and scholars draw a line between Islamic medicine and "prophetic" medicine. Prophetic Medicine is related only to the collection of "hadiths" or accounts of the sayings and actions of the prophet of Islam "Muhammad" that are related to sickness, diet, hygiene, and other aspects or determinants of health.^{13,14} Prophetic medicine is distinct from Islamic medicine by the fact that according to the majority of Muslims, there is no need to search for scientific explanation or evidence on the effectiveness or the mechanism of action because they are considered credible solely on the basis that they originated from the prophet of Islam.¹¹ This explains the importance and the widespread use of cupping therapy (Hijamah) in Saudi Arabia and other Muslims societies,^{1,15} and the priority given to cupping therapy for regulation in Saudi Arabia. Influences of religion, highlights the controversy of searching for scientific evidence for a practice that has been promoted by the prophet of Islam. In addition, it reflects the complexity of evaluating the compound effect of Hijamah, if accompanied by prayer as a part of religious belief.

3. Cupping technique used in practice

Wet-cupping (AlHijamah) is by far the most common type of cupping used in Saudi Arabia. However, the wet-cupping technique used in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East is different from the one used in China or Korea. In the Middle East technique, they usually use a three or triple steps procedure (cupping – puncture – cupping) order of steps,¹⁶ with the use of a sharp surgical blade for the scarification. Cupping sites nomenclature is also different although it can be related to the corresponding Ashi points in Chinese acupuncture. The common cupping sites used are mainly at the back and the neck. Other sites can be included according to the condition.¹⁷⁻¹⁹ The wet cupping technique used in China, Korea, and Germany, usually uses two-step procedures.¹⁶ They apply the cups only after puncture (puncture – cupping) with the use of auto-lancet needles rather than surgical blades. In certain countries or protocols, they are guided by the acupuncture points as the sites of cupping.²⁰ Auto-lancet is currently encouraged in Saudi Arabia as it is easier to use especially for the beginners and it was used in the clinical trials conducted by the Saudi NCCAM using a modified Korean protocol.^{20,21} However, traditional healers in Muslims countries favor our local technique (three-steps) as it was used during the life of the Prophet of Islam.²² The method reported in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East (cupping – puncture – cupping) is claimed to give a more extended opportunity for the filtration process to achieve better results and better excretory outcomes. Also, the presence of suctioning step as the first step may help in protecting the dermal capillaries from being damaged by this intervention. Also, the superficial scarifications/puncturing after initial cupping is considered to give a chance for the suction pressure to help in excretion the local intercellular fluids and assist in the capillary filtration process.²² Traditional practitioners believe that when they do not start with the suctioning first, this approach will lead to increase in the possibility of pain compared to the anesthetic effect that resulted from suctioning first.^{22,23} Both techniques (the local traditional three-steps versus two-steps Asian) were compared in a clinical trial for the management of chronic low back pain.²⁴ The interim results of the trial did not show any significant differences between the two techniques regarding the pain outcome measures.²⁵

4. The profile of Hijamah (cupping therapy) user

The profile of Hijamah user in Saudi Arabia differs significantly in some characteristics compared to the general characteristics of the overall TM user. Regional studies conducted in Saudi Arabia showed that TM user is more likely to be Saudi national, older, female with a lower rank job and education.^{6,26} The characteristics or profile of the T&CM user in Saudi Arabia is similar to the Eastern countries²⁷ but not the western societies specifically The United States except for gender.^{28,29} However, Hijamah user in Saudi Arabia is not affected by gender, education, and job in the same manner. Hijamah user can be a male or female with a broader range of age, with

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