Cultural Considerations

Medicinal Practices of the Hmong  Some cultural folk medicine practices can be easily mistaken for child abuse. There is an Asian population referred to as the Hmong or “Hill People” that is among the oldest populations in Asia. Many Hmong were recruited by the Central Intelligence Agency and were allied with the United States in the secret war in Laos that was fought contemporaneously with the war in Vietnam. When these countries fell, more than 100,000 Hmong were killed by the Communist insurgents. Numerous Hmong families immigrated to the United States—usually with the help of various church groups—and settled primarily in southern California and the Midwest.

In their folk medicine belief system, coining, cupping, and pinching are common practices. With coining, a utensil with a rounded edge (such as a coin or spoon) is used to rub the skin until bruising appears. This procedure leaves an oval ecchymotic area with an irregular border. Cupping treatment creates a vacuum effect that is thought to draw out pain. It is done by burning cotton in a small jar and placing the jar over the affected area after the flame is out. The sign of this is a round ecchymotic area. Pinching is commonly used to alleviate headaches. It is performed by pinching the skin until bruising appears. The result is a narrow bruise, often found between the eyes. As noted, all of these folk remedies result in bruising. It is also common to puncture and bleed these ecchymotic areas in an effort to release toxins thought to cause the illness. The puncture usually is done with a sewing needle.

Soon after their settlement in the United States, numerous Hmong children were referred to child protection authorities for investigation of suspected child abuse—usually by well-meaning health care professionals. Some of the bruising secondary to coining, cupping, or pinching seemed symptomatic of child abuse to those unfamiliar with Hmong culture. However, following investigation, it was learned that these were loving actions designed to make the child or adult well.

In areas where Hmong are present, cultural diversity education programs are available to provide information on the folk medicine and cultural practices of this interesting group of people.

★ Absence of nearly all emotions
★ Neediness, constantly requesting favors, food, or things

In general, use your instincts and knowledge of age-appropriate behavior (see Chapters 1 and 2) to guide your first impression of the child. If the child's behavior is atypical, maintain an index of suspicion throughout your assessment.

IDENTIFICATION OF THE ABUSED CHILD

As you know, children very commonly get injured and not all injured children are abused. If a child volunteers the story of his injury without hesitation and if it matches the story told by the parent and the symptoms of injury, child abuse is very unlikely. However, in cases in which the behavior of a caregiver and/or child has raised an index of suspicion, you may face a challenge in distinguishing between an intentional injury and an authentic accident. Conditions commonly mistaken for abuse are car seat burns, staphylococcal scalded skin syndrome, chickenpox (cigarette burns), and hematological disorders that can cause bruising. In assessing a child, look for common patterns of physical abuse, evidence of emotional abuse, and/or environmental clues of neglect.

Review

Conditions Commonly Mistaken for Abuse

- Car seat burns
- Staphylococcal scalded skin syndrome
- Chickenpox (cigarette burns)
- Hematological disorders that cause easy bruising