

## CUPPING THERAPY FROM MEDIEVAL ART TO MODERN SCIENCE

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Article Received on  
27 October 2020,

Revised on 17 Nov. 2020,  
Accepted on 07 Dec. 2020

DOI: 10.20959/wjpr20211-19431

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### ABSTRACT

Bloodletting is an important medical procedure in Unani medicine to cure diseases related to blood and many other causes. This method is performed by three ways e.g. *Hijama* (cupping), *Irsal-i-alaq* (leeching) and *Fasd* (venesection) which comes under *Ilaj Bi'l Tadbir* (Regimenal therapy) in Unani System of Medicine and is amongst the oldest medical manipulations practiced by our ancestors. Although it has 3000-year history and was practiced through different ages, it is now regarded by some as repulsive. However, the physician and his treatment should be judged in the light of the era of the disease. In this article a brief information about the introduction, history, points and recent scientific studies on *Hijama* (cupping) are discussed.

**KEYWORDS:** Wet Cupping, *Hijama*, Unani System of Medicine.

### INTRODUCTION

Various method of treatments are employed in different system of medicine in the world such as Regimenal therapy, Dietotherapy and Pharmacotherapy etc. Among them, regimenal therapy has very remarkable status; therefore, it is being adopted globally. Different procedures like leeching, *Hijama* (cupping), venesection, massage, emesis, exercise, acupressure and acupuncture etc are used in Regimenal therapy under Indian and Chinese System of Medicine. Among them *Hijama* (cupping) is one such *Tadabir* (regimes) used in Unani Medicine which causes intervention through restoration of humoural balance by

diverting or evacuating the morbid materials and it is practiced for many disease conditions since time immemorial. *Hijama* or *Al-Hijama* is taken from Arabic word "*Hajam*" which means "sucking" and literally it means to reduce in size i.e. to return the body back to its natural state. In English *Hijama* is termed as cupping, Taber's dictionary reveals that the application of glass vessel to the skin from which air can be exhausted by heat or a special suction apparatus is known as cupping.<sup>[1,2]</sup> Most Unani physicians described the effectiveness of *Hijama Bi'l Shurt* (wet cupping) in various ailments by removing blood having noxious matters through the superficial small vessels located in muscles.<sup>[3,4,5,6,7]</sup> In the Arabian Gulf, *Hijama* was used not only for treatment but also for prophylaxis against diseases. The pearl divers in the Arabian Gulf used to undergo *Hijama* before the diving season in the belief that the procedure will prevent diseases during the 3 months at sea. It was thought to be very effective against dizziness.<sup>[8]</sup> Cupping was used to diminish headache, restore appetite and improve digestion, remove the tendency to faint, to draw 'matter' to the surface, increase secretions, promote menstrual flow, hasten the crisis of disease, remove too great a disposition to sleep and, if applied behind the ears, to produce a natural and refreshing repose.<sup>[9]</sup>

Traditionally, cupping therapy has been practiced in most cultures in one form or another. It can be divided into two broad categories: Dry Cupping and Wet Cupping. In Unani System of medicine broadly it is divided into dry cupping, wet cupping and fire cupping. Dry cupping is used for the *Imala* (diversion) and wet cupping is used for the *istifragh* (evacuation) of the disease causing matters and fire cupping is used for both *Imala* and evacuation of the matter. Unani physicians like Galen, Ibn Sina, Razi, Ibn Hubal have used this procedure for the treatment of various diseases like headache, epilepsy, alopecia, paralysis, palpitation, loss of memory, insomnia, hepatic and splenic disorders etc.

**Historical background:** The practice of *Hijama* has been part of Middle-Eastern cultural practice for thousands of years with citations dating back to the time of Hippocrates (400 BC). Of the western world, the first to embrace cupping were the ancient Egyptians, and the oldest recorded medical textbook, Ebers Papyrus, written in approximately 1550 BC in Egypt mentions cupping which means 'to remove the foreign matter from the body'.<sup>[10]</sup> Herodotus, in 400 BC, records that both bleeding and cupping were already used by the Egyptians whose physicians extensively recommended the application of cups to the body either for the extraction of blood by scarification, or to produce blistering alone (dry

cupping). Celsus was a strong advocate of bloodletting by scarification and cupping to relieve local conditions, but preferred venesection for acute disease. Galen was also an advocate of bloodletting and cupping and this form of therapy was extremely popular in the later years of the Roman Empire. It was also much recommended by the Arab physicians of the middle ages and the practice spread through Italy and eventually to the rest of Europe during the renaissance. Cupping was much in vogue in Italy for gout and other forms of arthritis. Among the physicians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who recommended cupping were Sydenham, Willis, Pitcairn, Mead and Heberden in England, Boerhaave in Holland and Baron Larrqy, Napoleon's surgeon, was also an advocate of bloodletting.<sup>[9]</sup> After a long period of neglect, *Hijama* (cupping) was revived in the Islamic age. The Prophet Muhammed (PBUH) is reported to have been a user and advocate of *Hijama* (cupping) therapy, It has been reported that the Prophet Mohammad (Sallallaahu Álayhi Wasallam ) said, "Indeed the best of remedies you have is cupping, in drinking honey, and in cauterizing with fire, but I forbid my Ummah (nation) from cauterization (branding with fire)" [Saheeh al-Bukhaaree (5371)]. Although cupping was not very popular during the medieval period, its history dates as far back as Hippocrates, who recommended cupping breasts in order to relieve excessive menstruation.<sup>[11]</sup> Hippocrates describes both dry cupping (Non-invasive cupping) and wet cupping (invasive cupping or cupping with scarification) in his *Guide to Clinical Treatment* and gave instructions as to the shape and application of cups. He recommended that they should be small in diameter, conical in shape and light in their weight, when the disease for which they are applied is deep seated and if the disease was near the surface, they should be wide. He recommended dry cupping mainly but only a limited use of wet cupping.<sup>[12,9]</sup> The apparatus for *Hijama* is termed as *Mehjama* which is of different shape like *Qarn* (animal horn), *Aabkhora* (bowl or cup) and *Qara* (gourd or pumpkin).<sup>[7]</sup> Initially, hollow animal horns were used for the purpose of *Hijama* so called *Singhee*. The ancient Greeks used a *Qara* (gourd) for cupping. At the apex of the gourd a small aperture was made where the lips could be applied for producing a vacuum, which further evolved into bamboo cups, which were eventually replaced by glass or plastic cups. In the early days the technique was used solely for bloodletting purposes but nowadays it is claimed that various diseases can be treated by *Hijama*.<sup>[13,14,9]</sup>

Al-Zahrawi said: "The application of cupping to the shoulders helps in relieving palpitation of the heart arising from plethora and heat." He also said: "What cupping does is to draw

blood out of the fine vessels (capillaries) dispersed over the flesh; for this reason it does not cause the strength to decline as does venesection.

The complaints in which the Egyptians used scarifying, for which Alpinus quotes the authority of Herodotus, a celebrated physician of antiquity, were the following: "Scarification, with cupping, possesses the power of evacuating offending matter from the head, diminishing pain of the same part, lessening inflammation, restoring appetite, strengthening weak stomach, treating vertigo, drawing deep-seated offending matter towards the surface, arresting the tendency to putrefaction in fevers, allaying rigors, conciliating natural repose, and many analogous maladies, are relieved by the judicious application of the cupping, dry or wet".<sup>[15]</sup>

**Best Time and Days for doing *hijama*:** Ibn-Sina explained the prevailing thought at that time on the best timing to perform Hijama: "Some authorities advice against the procedure at the beginning of the lunar month, because the humours are not yet on the move or not in a state of agitation; also against performing it at the end of the (lunar) month, because at that period (of the cycle) the humours are less plentiful. The proper time according to them is the middle of the lunar month (when the humours are in a state of agitation) and during the time when the moonlight is increasing (when the humours are also in excess volume). The best time for doing *Hijama* is 2-3 hours after sunrise. It should be done in summer season because due to heat the harmful matter is in more dilute form."<sup>[8,16]</sup>

**Specific points for doing *hijama*:** There are certain points or areas on the body described by eminent Unani Physicians for induction of *Hijama* which are as follows:

*Yafookh* (Fontanel), *Hamma* (Bregma), *Qamhadwa* (external occipital eminence), *Nuqra* (nap of the neck), *Sadghain* (temporal region), *Bainul Abru* (between eyebrow), *Akhdain* (both side of neck on posterior juglar area), *Tahtuzziqan* (below the chin), *Bainul Kahil* (between Scapula), *Naghis* (Atlanto occipital/yes joint & atlanto axial/no joint), *Mankab* (on shoulder, posterior to the clavicle), *Rasghulyad* (wrist), *Ka' bain* (elbow joint), *Zere Pistan* (below breast), *Batan* (abdomen), *Bala-i-Naf* (above umbilicus), *Zer-i-Naf* (bellow umbilicus), *Qutun* (lower back), *Warikain* (Hips), *Fakhazain* (thigh), *Saq* (calf muscle), *Surin* (buttock), 'As'as (coccyx) etc.<sup>[12,17]</sup>

**Recent scientific studies on *hijama*:** Cupping therapy may be a solution for sufferings faced in many diseases manifested by pain. Reviewing the literature for cupping therapy revealed

that it can relieve pain of lumbar disc herniation, herpes zoster, cervical spondylosis,<sup>[18]</sup> RA,<sup>[19]</sup> brachialgia paraesthetica nocturna,<sup>[20]</sup> CTS,<sup>[21]</sup> acute gouty arthritis,<sup>[22]</sup> fibrositis,<sup>[23]</sup> firomyalgia,<sup>[24,25,26,27]</sup> persistent nonspecific low back pain,<sup>[28]</sup> chronic non-specific neck pain,<sup>[29,30,31]</sup> chronic osteoarthritis,<sup>[32]</sup> acute trigeminal neuralgia,<sup>[33]</sup> headache and migraine.<sup>[34]</sup> For proper worldwide recognition of cupping therapy, improvement of disease conditions on cupping therapy needs proper scientific interpretation for scientific mechanisms underlying benefits of cupping therapy.

A case study showed that cupping therapy is found as an effective measure in the treatment of honey bee sting induced cellulitis.<sup>[35]</sup> Hanan, and Eman, reported that cupping therapy is effective in relieving persistent non-specific lower back pain and disability and no adverse effects were reported from subjects after the treatment.<sup>[36]</sup> Traditional wet-cupping care delivered in a primary care setting was safe and acceptable to patients with nonspecific low back pain. Wet-cupping care was significantly more effective in reducing bodily pain than usual care at 3-month follow-up.<sup>[37]</sup>

*Hijama Bi'l Shurt* in combination with Unani formulation for *Waja'al Mafasil* is better than when compared with formulation alone.<sup>[38]</sup> Research Studies on cupping therapy suggested significant pain reduction for cupping in low back pain compared with usual care and analgesia. Another study also showed positive effects of cupping in cancer pain and trigeminal neuralgia compared with anticancer drugs and analgesics, respectively. It is reported favorable effects of cupping on pain in brachialgia compared with usual care or heat pad.<sup>[39]</sup> Wet -cupping leads to clinical relevant benefits for primary care patients with headache.<sup>[40]</sup> The first trial was a German study, published in the *Journal of Pain* in 2009. The researchers investigated the effect of the cupping therapy as a treatment for the carpal tunnel syndrome. There were 52 participants in this trial. The patients were randomly assigned to either a treatment group or a control group. The treatment group experienced pain relief and a decrease in other symptoms.<sup>[21]</sup>

## CONCLUSION

According to Unani Physicians Cupping Therapy is very effective method to treat many diseases by evacuating or diverging the disease causing matters in the body and make a balance in humours thus by removing or balancing the humours it relieves several ailments. Reviewing the literature for cupping therapy from medieval to modern era revealed that it can relieve systemic and non-systemic both types of diseases e.g. disc prolapse, blood disorders,

cerebral disorders, gynecological problems, pain, inflammatory conditions, mental and physical illness, varicose veins, sciatica, arthritis and inflammation of deep organ etc. Still more researches should be undertaken in this field to reveal all the benefits of cupping that are mentioned in authentic texts.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We are so grateful to the library of RRIUM, Srinagar, Central Council for Research in Unani Medicine, and Kashmir University, Srinagar for providing helpful textbooks and internet facility.

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