

## ELECTION - A STRESSFUL LIFE EVENT

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### ABSTRACT

*54 patients who sought consultation at this centre after developing psychiatric illness following local panchayat elections in Rajasthan were studied. The study aims to find out whether election is a stressful life event, relationship of socio-demographic characteristics, role of process of election, and nature of psychiatric illness as related to election stress. This group was compared to general psychiatric patients randomly selected from the same hospital, with or without other stressful life events (n=60). Socio-demographic variables, nature of their illness, ways of coping with the stress and relationship of predisposition to mental illness have been studied in both groups. Findings have been discussed and implications highlighted.*

*Key words : Stressful life event, election, psychiatric disorders*

The notion that major stressful events in life can give rise to mental illness is prevalent since antiquity. Psychosocial stresses form an inseparable part of life and upto a degree may be essential for adequate personality development. Considerable research has been done on the correlation between experience of life events and development or precipitation of psychiatric illnesses. Most of the studies have suggested a positive relationship between stressful life events and subsequent illness. These studies centered around the stressors (Paykel et al., 1971, in his 61 item scale; Holmes & Rahe, 1967, 43 items and Singh et al., 1984, 51 items). Any of the scales do not include election as a stressful life event.

In last several years authors observed that each time following election, there is an acute upsurge in number of patients seeking psychiatric services. Recently when panchayat elections in Rajasthan were held in January and February, 1995, authors found a similar trends and a significant proportion of patients perceived election as stress in

different ways. We therefore decided to study this aspect systematically with the aims-whether election is a stressful life event associated with onset of psychiatric illnesses; what are the socio-demographic characteristics of individuals perceiving election as a stress; what is the nature of psychiatric disorder following election stress and whether there are any differences between patients with election stress and those with or without other stressful life events.

### MATERIAL AND METHOD

In order to fulfil the above aims, the authors started making deliberate enquiry regarding presence of life events (on PSLE or election), which might have been stressful to the patients in the last one year. A total of 114 patients admitted to emergency unit of Psychiatric Centre, Jaipur on specified days (3 days a week) were included in the study. Exclusion criteria were - patients with history of head injury, physical trauma, fever, loss of conscious-

TABLE  
CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

Variable	Number of patients reporting			$\chi^2$
	Election stress (n=54)	Other stress (n=20)	No stress (n=40)	
<b>Age (in years)</b>				
Below 20	3 (5.5%)	4 (20%)	7 (17.5%)	14.37*
21-30	20 (37%)	11 (55%)	10 (25%)	
31-40	15 (27.8%)	4 (20%)	10 (25%)	
Above 40	16 (29.7%)	1 (5%)	13 (32.5%)	
<b>Sex</b>				
Male	51 (94.5%)	8 (40%)	24 (60%)	26.93**
Female	3 (5.5%)	12 (60%)	16 (40%)	
<b>Occupational status</b>				
Farmer	30 (55.5%)	2 (10%)	14 (35%)	18.1*
House wife	3 (5.5%)	11 (55%)	12 (30%)	
Labourer	5 (9.2%)	1 (5%)	6 (12.5%)	
Student	3 (5.5%)	2 (10%)	3 (7.5%)	
Others	13 (24.3%)	4 (20%)	6 (15%)	
<b>Sleep deprivation</b>	32 (59.2%)	6 (30%)	28 (70%)	8.85*
<b>Past mental illness</b>	22 (40.8%)	7 (35%)	28 (70%)	10.05*
<b>Positive family history</b>	21 (38.9%)	8 (40%)	26 (65%)	7.06*
<b>Diagnostic break up</b>				
Acute psychosis	28 (51.8%)	9 (45%)	4 (10%)	39.95**
Mania (first episode)	7 (13%)	4 (20%)	1 (2.5%)	
Depression	2 (3.7%)	0	2 (5%)	
MDP-M	16 (29.7%)	3 (15%)	12 (30%)	
Schizophrenia	1 (1.8%)	4 (20%)	21 (52.5%)	

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.001$

ness, convulsion and other history suggestive of organicity.

A socio-demographic data sheet with details of family history, past history of mental illness, history of drug abuse, and sleep deprivation was recorded. Relation with the contestant and result of election was also noted. Patients were also provided with presumptive stressful life event scale (Singh *et al.*, 1984) to enquire about other stressful life events in the last one year. Diagnosis was made according to ICD-10. Data was analysed and compared

by chi-square test.

## RESULTS

A total of 114 patients were studied, among them 54 (47.4%) perceived election as a stressful life event, 20 (17.6%) perceived the stresses included in PSLE and 40 (35%) did not report any stress.

## DISCUSSION

From the results it is evident that

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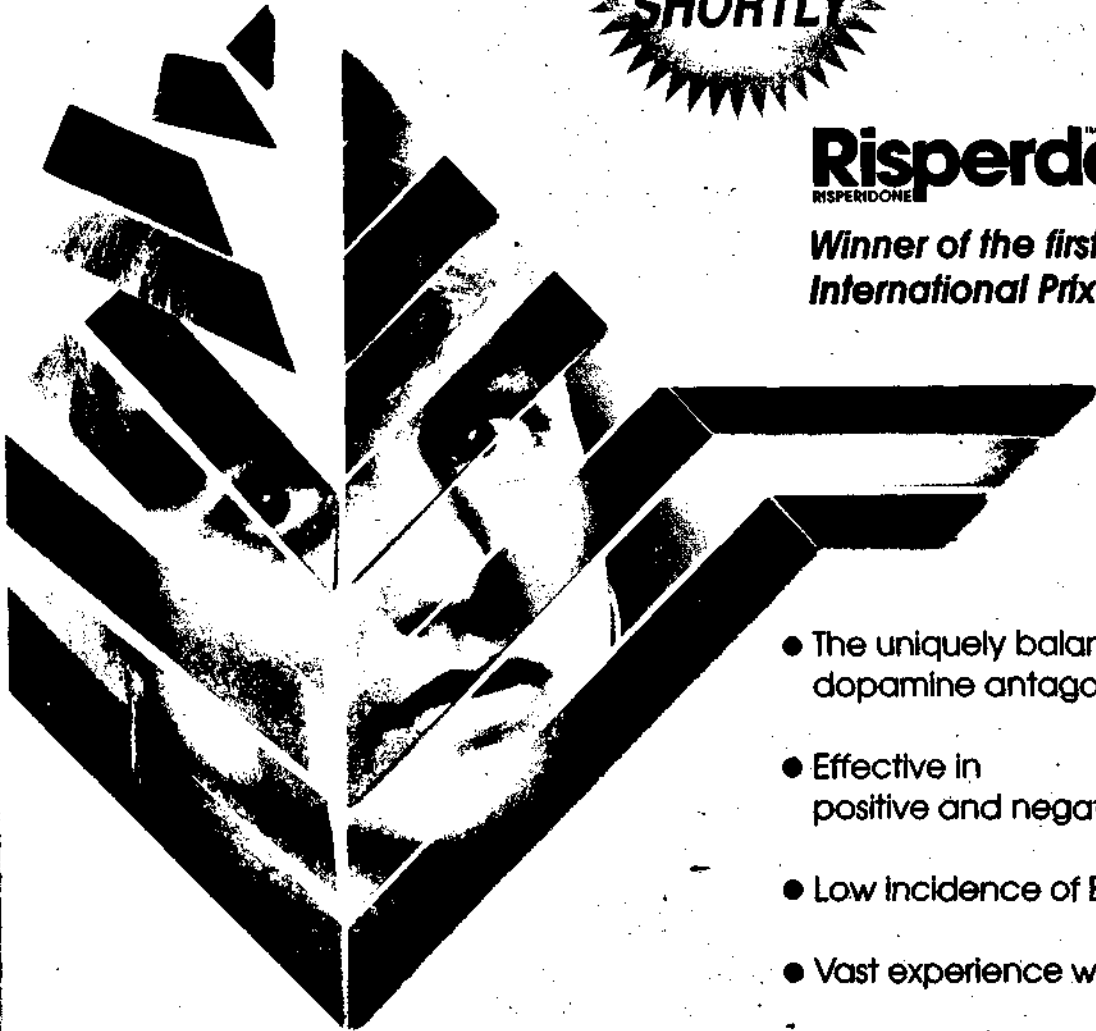
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majority of patients (65%) who perceived election as stressful life event were from 21 to 40 years of age and 95% were males as against 50% in the same age group and 32.5% in the age group above 40 years in the control group (patients with no stressful life events), which maybe interpreted by the fact that in the process of electioneering people between 21-40 years of age group are likely to combat more stress. Although in certain rural areas reservation for the females has been made but they are still confined to the conventional role of housewives and only small percentage of them take part in campaigning and contesting election. This may explain preponderance of males in the studied sample. All subjects were from rural background in the election stress group because the study was conducted after panchayat elections (rural local body) and majority were therefore farmers (55%).

*Coping the stress* : There are different ways of coping the stress but the common method employed is the use of intoxicants. It was found in this study that there was history of use of intoxicants in 24% subjects, most commonly used were alcohol and cannabis products. It was also seen that preceding the psychotic illness 60% persons spent sleepless nights with excessive use of tea & coffee and remained busy in the process of electioneering. On the contrary in patients with no history of stressful life events 70% experienced insomnia as a symptom of psychiatric illness rather than sleep deprivation. Whether use of intoxicants and sleeplessness is a part of election campaigning process or an early manifestation of psychiatric illness ? . Because in the control group also, 42% people with history of no stressful life events had history of intoxication and 20% patients with history of stresses other than election had history of use of intoxicants. Therefore use of intoxicants in itself is found in all the 3 groups and the differences are not statistically significant. The authors feel that sleep

deprivation during the process of electioneering is quite common and is not a symptom of psychiatric morbidity rather, it acts as a precipitating stressor.

*Predisposition to mental illness* : When we analysed the involvement of individuals in election, it was found that 26% were contestant themselves who either lost election or were made to withdraw their candidature. 28% were close family members, 35% were family relatives and 9% were friends involved in election campaigning. Relationship with result of election shows 26% developed psychiatric illness before announcement of result, while 22% developed illness after the candidate was declared elected. Only 2% were scared of riots during elections, rest of them (50%) either had lost election (39%) or were forcibly made to withdraw their candidature (11%). This shows that election stress has its impact not only on candidates contesting but also on others involved in the process and general population.

While looking at diagnostic break up (according to ICD-10), 52% were diagnosed as acute psychosis (F 23.1), 30% were having bipolar affective disorder (MDP-M) and presented in manic phase (F 31.2), 13% were first episode mania (F 30.1), 3% had depressive illness while only one patient could be diagnosed as schizophrenia (F 20.0). In most of the patients thought contents were related to events of election. As against this the diagnosis of acute psychosis could be made in only 10% of cases in control group and there were more established cases of schizophrenia and affective disorder with no history of stressful life events or other stress on PSLE.

In the knowledge of authors election has not been reported as the stressful life event, although it has been the experience of many senior psychiatrists. There are no comparable studies available in the Indian literature as well as western research to which the author had access. It is therefore suggested that election maybe included as a stressful life event in various stressful life events inventories.

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