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Dermatological Atlas of Indigenous People



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Preface

The Escola Paulista de Medicina/Universidade Federal de São Paulo (EPM/UNIFESP), Brazil, has developed health assistance activities and teaching and research programs among indigenous people since 1965. It is a Brazilian university with considerable experience in that area.

The Brazil Unified Health System (SUS) calls for universal care mainly in primary care. The health of indigenous people has received special attention from the Ministry of Health, and special Indigenous Sanitary Districts have been established throughout the territory of Brazil.

Professionals who work in the field of indigenous health should see that this subsystem works and is viable. The Xingu Project from EPM/UNIFESP has worked intensively on raising awareness of and training professionals to work on the health of indigenous people. The extension courses for interested health students are a part of this work.

Proposals regarding knowledge of and intervention in health problems affecting indigenous communities are ambitious. They involve holding a continuous dialogue with different cultures in order to understand their worldviews, their healing systems, and their conceptions of health and disease. In addition, we need to develop actions in primary care to minimize the negative health impact arising from contact of indigenous peoples with the broader society and to adapt health intervention models in application to different indigenous groups and their social realities and lifestyles. Brazil is home to 230 indigenous peoples speaking 180 languages, a group of about 600,000 people. This is the main action field of the Xingu Project.

Among the various activities related to the overall health of these people, the experience and photographic documentation recorded over the years have allowed the authors and contributors to gather rich materials related to some skin diseases that affect these populations. This *Dermatological Atlas of Indigenous People* is a result of the work conducted over several years. We have as our goal the production of material that sheds light on the clinical-dermatological aspects and the culture of these peoples. The therapeutic management of various clinical situations described here has always strived to incorporate the best and latest clinical practices, but whenever possible taking into account their economic viability because many indigenous populations live in less-developed countries.

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Social Representations of the Body, the Skin, and Related Diseases in Indigenous Thought

1

Thinking of the body, you can mistakenly face it as purely biological, a universal patrimony whereupon the culture would write different histories. After all, men of different nationalities show physical similarities. However, in addition to physical similarities or differences, a set of meanings that each society writes on their members' body through time, these meanings define the body in various ways. Daolio, 1995

The original idea of this book arose from the observation of the high prevalence of skin diseases in the daily routine of health professionals who work for the Primary Health Care in Amazon's indigenous areas and the absence of adequate support material for these professionals.

As a result of an action-research called "Dermatologic Investigation and Evaluation of Jorge Lobo's Disease Evolution in Caiabi Indigenous People, Central Brazil," financed by the São Paulo Research Foundation – Fapesp (process 2006/03908-0), which had as its objectives, besides reviewing the Jorge Lobo's disease cases, the performance of an investigation into the prevalence of dermatosis in the villages of the middle, lower, and upper regions of the Xingu Indigenous Park and the local health staff's capacity to manage mainly skin diseases found in their daily local services. The production of this atlas was made by the cooperation of the Xingu Project, the Department of Preventive Medicine, and the Department of Dermatology of Escola Paulista de Medicina/Unifesp (EPM/UNIFESP).

It seemed important to present in this book, besides scientific knowledge, the indigenous people's vision of their own bodies and skin, the way they think, classify, and interfere with the health-disease process, and which therapeutic itinerary they adopt to treat skin-related issues.

1.1 The Body and the Skin: Center of Social Signs

The body and, in particular, the skin are a person's introduction to their environment and community, which is why it is believed to represent an individual's contact with the external, ruled by culture. Such signs as tattoos, paintings, and

scarifications can be registered on the body and reveal what group a person belongs to, her social status, or even her state of mind.

As a canvas, the skin can display several drawings, combining colors and adornments, depending on the moment, one's state of mind or health, or the ritual one is participating in. In general, during mourning periods the body is not painted or adorned, thereby revealing sorrowful feelings.

According to David Le Breton, in his book *A Sociologia do Corpo*¹ on bodily inscriptions:

Social and cultural bodily markings can be completed by direct writing by the collective on the actor's skin. It can be made in the form of removal, deformation, or addition. This symbolic modeling is relatively frequent in human societies: ritual ablation of a bodily fragment (prepuce, clitoris, teeth, fingers, tonsure, etc.); epidermis marking (scarifications, incisions, apparent scar, infibulation, teeth modeling, etc.); tegumentary inscriptions in the form of permanent or temporary tattoos, make-up, etc.; body form modifications [...]; use of jewelry or objects that deform the body: reed rings and pearls that cause, to the individual growth, a neck extension, inserting disks in the upper and lower lips [...]. These bodily markings fulfill different functions in each society. Seduction instruments are more often a ritual way of indicating affiliation or segregation. They symbolically integrate people within their community or clan, separating them from other communities or clans and, at the same time, the surrounding nature. They humanize the person, putting him socially in the world [...]. They reproduce the social status or, more specifically, the matrimonial status in a world that can be read by everybody.

Regarding the body and the skin as the center of social meanings, Clastres² reveals another perspective, the body "as written surface [...] able to receive the legible law text," obedience to rules and social laws, particularly when referring to the role of suffering and scars. The body is the memory, for example, in the initiatory rituals of indigenous societies, scarifications, tattoos, or other procedures that leave a mark, a mark that tells the story of the subject's life. Changes in the body and skin occur during every biological

¹Le Breton [13].

²Clastres [14].