Xylophagia: A meta-synthesis of the literature

ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** This review provides an insight into xylophagia, its treatment, intervention options, etiological causes, and possible relationship with other diseases.

**Design/methodology/approach:** A systematic search was performed across four scientific databases (i.e., Ovid Medline, Embase via Ovid, PubMed and ProQuest). All of the qualitative studies reporting on xylophagia from the inception of databases until August 2019 have been included. The quality of included studies was assessed through a 10-item checklist given by Kmet, Lee, and Cook in 2004.

**Findings:** A total of 18 studies were included, and five primary themes emerged after analysis: 1) Precipitation/onset of xylophagia, 2) Co-morbid psychiatric or medical illnesses, 3) Assessment and investigation modes to confirm diagnosis, 4) Outcomes of xylophagia, and 5) Treatment options comprising medical care, psychological care, counselling, and duration of recovery. There were 16 females and 9 males in included studies. The mean age and standard deviation of males and females were 29.25(12.17) years and 32.81(11.92), respectively. The mean duration and standard deviation of paper pica were 4.80(4.27) years.

**Research implications:** Despite the limitation that this meta-synthesis is based upon findings from case studies, results show that standardized medication regimens for treating xylophagia are still not available or unknown. There is a dire need for further research in order to better understand the disorder. The healthcare professionals need to use the reciprocal, mutually constituent influence of biological and sociocultural factors in order to screen, diagnose and manage problems like xylophagia.

**Originality/value:** The findings advance our understanding of the positive effects of patients and family members undergoing counselling or cognitive behavior therapy in reducing stress and enhancing coping skills thus avoiding self-damaging behaviors has been established.

**Keywords:** Xylophagia, Pica, Eating Disorder, Psychosis, Health Services, Qualitative Research, Health Policy, Quality of Care
Key Points

1. This review provides an insight into xylophagia, its treatment and intervention options, possible etiological causes, postulated relationships with other diseases and highlights its inclusion in differentials of a medico-legal physician.

2. This paper highlights factors that lead to precipitation/onset of xylophagia, the co-morbid psychiatric or medical illnesses, various assessment and investigation modes to confirm the diagnosis of xylophagia, the outcomes of xylophagia, and various treatment options comprising medical care, psychological care, counselling, and duration of recovery.

3. This review includes xylophagia studies from various countries and shows that xylophagia is multifaceted and underdiagnosed.

4. There were females and males in included studies indicating its prevalence across gender.

5. This review suggests a need for biopsychosocial integration in diagnosing and treating eating disorders.
Introduction

The simple act of eating has a certain cost as food has been shown to be the cause of millions of deaths globally due to various mechanisms. The consumptions of hundreds of microbial, chemical and physical agents can result in illness and have various lethal outcomes (Acheson, 1999, Jacob et al., 1990, Parakh et al., 2016, Dalal et al., 2013, Barros et al., 1991). The forensic pathologists frequently come across cases of death by food and occasional and culturally-specific cases of death due to intentional or unintentional intake of pathogens, poisons, and foodstuffs (Byard, 2017).

Xylophagia is described as the consumption of substances made up of wood such as paper, pencils, boxes, toothpicks, matches and tree barks; with paper ingestion the most frequently reported type (Gowda et al., 2014, Moore and Sears, 1994). It is a form of pica, where a person has a developmentally inappropriate compulsive yearning for and eats non-nutritive substances (Blinder and Salama, 2008). Pica is explained in the field of medicine as an unnatural appetite that initiates a craving for unhealthy substances. Other kinds of pica comprise lithophagia (stone eating), geophagia (dirt eating), ice (pagophagia), gravel, paint flakes, clay, hair (trichophagia), and laundry starch (amylophagia) (Byard, 2014, Parry-Jones and Parry-Jones, 1992, Loots and du Toit-Prinsloo, 2016). There has been much ambiguity in classification of this disorder, with the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders version 5 (DSM-V) classifying it as an eating disorder in persons who fulfill the following criteria: persistent eating of non-nutritive substances for a period of at least one month, the consumption of non-nutritive substance that is inappropriate to the developmental level of an individual, eating behavior that is not culturally supported or socially practiced, or the behavior is severe enough to call for independent clinical attention if it occurs along with another mental disorder or medical condition (APA, 2013). Others, however, have suggested that it is on the obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) spectrum, given both the obsessive and compulsive features observed in patients (Bhatia and Gupta, 2009, Gundogar et al., 2003, Hergüner et al., 2008).

A variety of factors are involved in the etiology of pica, such as genetic, biological, and particularly sociocultural and nutria-physiological aspects (Rose et al., 2000, Levine and Smolak, 2014). Likewise, a past study has suggested the integration of sociocultural and biopsychiatric factors in etiology and management of eating disorders (Levine and Smolak, 2014). A study conducted on pregnant women in Mexico found that between approximately 30-50% of the women consumed dirt, ashes, and clay; believing that failure to do so would lead to
miscarriage (Simpson et al., 2000). A large part of the literature also attributes it to iron deficiency, although there remains some controversy as to whether it is a cause instead of an outcome of iron deficiency (Kettaneh et al., 2005, Gupta A et al., 2007). Other research studies have highlighted the role of social and religious customs, where pica is considered culturally-acceptable and is thus not viewed as pathological (Blinder and Salama, 2008). This ambiguity has then resulted in confusion as to how this condition should be treated. A review paper highlighting the forensic implications of pica (Byard, 2014) shows that various fatal mechanisms result in the death of a person with pica. In case of suspicion of pica in persons who are institutionalized or have developmental delay, post-mortem examinations should cautiously analyse the possible side effects of eating non-food substances (Byard, 2014). Authors highlight the presence of minimal presenting symptoms and signs due to a variety of reasons.

In children aged between 18 to 36 months, an incidence of pica greater than 50% is considered normal, and this is thought to decrease with age (Blinder and Salama, 2008). Among institutionalized patients, prevalence rates range from 4-26% (Walker and M.C. Roberts, 2001), and it was noted that from 1999 to 2009, hospitalization rates due to pica increased by more than 90% (Zhao and Encinosa, 2011). The intake of foreign bodies is commonly observed in children and certain susceptible adult populations such as alcoholics, the elderly with dentures, prisoners, and individuals with psychiatric problems (Yamaguchi et al., 2014, Zouros et al., 2014, Cangir et al., 2002, Velitchkov et al., 1996).

In most of the cases, the autopsy results reveal accidental intake of foreign bodies (e.g., meat or bones). In rare cases, the autopsy results reveal non-food components (e.g., teeth, glass fragments, dental crowns, batteries, or small toys) (Sreetharan et al., 2004), and suicidal intent must be considered when children or inebriated patients are involved in ingesting these substances (Krugman et al., 2007, Žganjer et al., 2011, Bloch et al., 2005, Nicolai and Reiter, 2004). There is a need for thorough knowledge and sufficient medico-legal experience in order to differentiate between suicidal acts and homicide (Sauvageau and Racette, 2006). Furthermore, in rare cases of drug abuse and eating disorders, there is an intake of non-food substances (Schaper et al., 2003).

The past empirical studies in various cases have shown that the intake of non-food pica (depending on the type, number, and size of the objects) leads to adverse health outcomes (e.g., aggressive periodontitis, lead poisoning, phosphorus poisoning, dental damage, mercury poisoning, nicotine poisoning, toxocara infections, hemolytic anemia, electrolyte disturbances, blockage, hemorrhage, and tamponade from vessel and heart
perforation, and sepsis) due to failure to digest the foreign substances (McLoughlin, 1988, Decker, 1993, Johnson, 1990, Federman et al., 1997, Glickman et al., 1981, Toker et al., 2009, Advani et al., 2014, Kar et al., 2015, Byard, 2000, Byard, 2014). The past empirical evidence has shown death due to: vagal stimulation with resultant cardiac arrhythmia, intestinal causes, and intestinal obstruction in some cases of pica (Wick et al., 2006, Byard, 2014). The intake of hair or paper may form bezoars which lead to intestinal obstruction due to absorption of fluid in the accumulated paper in the colon area (Byard, 2014). The presence of non-food substances in the aerodigestive tract of children at post-mortem examination is not always indicative of pica as the children may have intentionally or unintentionally eaten foreign material (Byard et al., 1990, Yamaguchi et al., 2014, Zouros et al., 2014). The variety of outcomes of pica and lack of specificity has added to the problems in diagnosing pica. The cultural contextualisation of eating disorders, as proposed in a past study (Levine and Smolak, 2014) needs to be comprehensively assessed.

As it pertains to xylophagia specifically, there is a paucity of data available due to differences in definitions as well as reluctance on the part of patients to admit to it (Blinder and Salama, 2008), further thwarting efforts to diagnose, prevent, and manage this disease comprehensively and effectively. Hence, there is ambiguity on the etiology of xylophagia and limited empirical evidence on the fatal or potentially fatal outcomes of xylophagia. Thus, this meta-synthesis was undertaken as an attempt to fill this gap, and provide a better understanding on xylophagia, its treatment, possible causes and postulated relationship with other diseases. A meta-synthesis is a systematic reviewing process that combines and analyses qualitative evidence in a coherent manner, with the primary purpose of developing a deeper understanding of a particular phenomenon (Erwin et al., 2011, Walsh and Downe, 2005, Campbell et al., 2003, Jensen and Allen, 1996). This meta-synthesis was of descriptive type as it analyzed the phenomenon of xylophagia comprehensively.

Methods

A systematic exploration of the qualitative empirical literature on xylophagia was carried out. Our focus was on gaining a better understanding of xylophagia, its prevention, treatment and intervention options, possible etiological causes and postulated relationship with other diseases. Therefore, meta-synthesis approach was used to assimilate and synthesize research studies related to xylophagia.
Search strategy. We carried out a thorough search strategy for finding related research studies (see Figure 1 PRISMA flow diagram). Using the keywords including xylophagia, paper eating, paper pica, and paper bezoar, we explored electronic databases including Ovid Medline, Embase via Ovid, PubMed, and ProQuest. We also manually searched reference lists of all the retrieved research studies for potentially related documents.

Inclusion/exclusion criteria. In order to identify the eligibility of research studies included in our meta-synthesis, we applied the inclusion and exclusion criteria on the titles, citations, and abstracts of retrieved articles. The search was updated to retrieve any study published between the dates of databases’ inception until August 2019. The inclusion criteria were: Qualitative studies published in peer-reviewed journals, letters to editors discussing cases of xylophagia and related brief reports. Studies related to xylophagia but no other forms of pica were selected. No restriction was made on the population being served. The exclusion criteria were: quantitative studies, literature reviews, articles written in a language other than English, and grey literature. The authors (KM, YMA, YZ, TMK, LT, FSB, and FRC) thoroughly reviewed each research article for inclusion in the meta-synthesis. The discrepancies were resolved through mutual discussion until a consensus was attained.

Quality assessment. If a review comprises research articles of low quality, the findings of review may be flawed, thereby endangering its reliability (Walsh and Downe, 2006). The quality of all the included studies was assessed using the 10-item criteria checklist given by Kmet, Lee, and Cook (Kmet et al., 2004). An overall rating ranging from 0 to 1 was assigned to every article; higher ratings were an indicator of higher quality. The lowest quality ratings of included studies in the present review were 0.2, we considered all studies adequate for inclusion in this review. (See Table 1, column “score in quality assessment”, and Online Resource; Supplementary Table 1 for “Quality rating of included studies”).

Analytic strategy. In order to review the research studies, we followed Noblit and Hare’s 7-step approach for synthesizing from qualitative studies (Noblit and Hare, 1988). This approach consists of these steps: searching eligible studies that fulfill inclusion criteria; screening retrieved literature; reading studies and extracting data;
determining how the studies are related; translating the studies into one another; synthesizing translation; and expressing the translation (Hines, 2013, Noblit and Hare, 1988). We began with reviewing every research study various times in order to recognize and record main themes along with details pertaining to the context of the study. We carried out a first order construct which involved making a data table for identifying main ideas and concepts throughout the research articles. This helped in finding the ways in which all research articles were related to one another. We then carried out second-order constructs. In this step, the finding of every research article was compared and contrasted systematically to identify points of convergence and divergence. This also helped us in matching themes across studies and formulating categories of themes. Additionally, we ensured that all the themes paralleled the overall line of argument relating to xylophagia that arose from our review.

Results

A total of 18 articles were included in this meta-synthesis. The characteristics of the 18 cases studies are shown in Table 1. This meta-synthesis comprises 14 case reports, 3 letters to editors and 1 experimental study. Seven studies reported cases of xylophagia from United States of America (US); two studies were carried out in India, one in Iran, Ireland, Germany, United Kingdom, Canada, South Africa, Greece, Australia, and Turkey respectively. There were 16 females and 9 males in included studies. The mean age and standard deviation of males and females were 29.25(12.17) years and 32.81(11.92), respectively. The mean duration and standard deviation of paper pica were 4.80(4.27) years.

Summary of synthesis. Five primary themes emerged from our meta-synthesis: 1) Precipitation/onset of Xylophagia, 2) Co-morbid psychiatric or medical illnesses, 3) Assessment and diagnostic methods, 4) Outcomes of xylophagia, and 5) Treatment options. The distribution of themes across the 18 papers is detailed in Figure 2. Table 2 shows selected data excerpts from included articles.

| See Figure 2 |
| See Table 2 |

1) Precipitation/Onset of Xylophagia
Causes and triggers of xylophagia: Studies included in this synthesis identified various causes and triggers of xylophagia, and in particular modelling of this behavior through vicarious learning (Bharti et al., 2015) including the symptom of celiac disease (Fotoulaki et al., 2007).

Family history: Some of the family members of xylophagia patient were reported as having a paper-eating habit before their onset (Bharti et al., 2015).

Duration: Some patients started eating paper or cardboard in order to escape from painful experiences and avoid reality. Duration of consumption was varied, with some reporting more than a year (Chisholm Jr and Martin, 1981), two to three years (Bharti et al., 2015, Gowda et al., 2014, Yalug et al., 2007), five years (Callinan and O'Hare, 1988), and 12 years (Olynyk and Sharpe, 1982). There were also adults who started from adolescence (Olynyk and Sharpe, 1982), while others started late in life (Dumaguing et al., 2003).

Maintaining factors: Various factors were found playing a role in the continuation and maintenance of this behavior. For instance, one study revealed that paper eating alone, learned through instrumental learning, was reinforced and maintained through escape learning. It progressed due to a lack of attention from family members (Bharti et al., 2015). Another study showed that paper eating became a pattern as the patient used to eat paper alone without anyone noticing the odd behavior, thus leading to persistent xylophagia (Gowda et al., 2014). Similarly, distorted beliefs about body image, traumatic family history, the pressure of family responsibility, and lack of amiable relations with a parent played a vital role in onset and continuation of paper eating (Yalug et al., 2007). The habit of eating cardboard also progressed in order to lose weight, control food intake, and attain satiety; as well as to reduce tension and achieve gratification (Callinan and O'Hare, 1988, Stein et al., 1996). Looking as a whole, these findings show an intricate interplay of psychological factors behind increasing vulnerability, acting as precipitating factors as well as maintaining factors of xylophagia.

2) Co-morbidity

Psychological disorders: These include inhalant use disorder (Gowda et al., 2014), alcohol dependence (Moore and Sears, 1994), schizophrenia (Klein et al., 2014), obsessive-compulsive disorder (Bharti et al., 2015), intellectual disabilities (Keeling et al., 1987); anorexia nervosa, major depressive disorder, panic disorder with
agoraphobia, social phobia, pica, and hair-pulling (Bakhshaeekia et al., 2009, Spaniolas et al., 2010, Stein et al., 1996, Yalug et al., 2007).

Medical diseases: These include: Mercury poisoning (Olynyk and Sharpe, 1982); anemia (Callinan and O'Hare, 1988); coeliac disease (Fotoulaki et al., 2007); gastritis and duodenitis (Moore and Sears, 1994). These findings reveal that understanding xylophagia is problematic because its symptomatology is complicated by the presence of various co-morbid psychological and medical disorders.

3) Assessment and diagnostic methods

Medical assessment/laboratory examinations/dietary history: Individuals with xylophagia present complicated symptomatology which has to be ruled out by a variety of screening and diagnostic procedures. This meta-synthesis reveals that medical specialists employed a complex array of testing procedures, for instance, abdominal x-ray, exploratory laparotomy (Bakhshaeekia et al., 2009); emogram, serum electrolytes, and serum iron tests, stool tests, magnetic resonance imaging, electroencephalography (Bharti et al., 2015); faecal occult blood tests, full blood count, blood film, white blood cell count, serum iron level, liver function test results, levels of serum protein, albumin, calcium, phosphate, urea, and electrolytes, blood glucose levels, and thyroid function measurements (Callinan and O'Hare, 1988). Similarly, diagnosticians have also employed dietary history, hematocrit level test, hemoglobin level test, corpuscular hemoglobin test, corpuscular hemoglobin count test, and serum zinc test (Chisholm Jr and Martín, 1981); Cognitive functions, physical examination, complete blood picture, urine routine and X-ray abdomen, liver function, peripheral blood smear examination (Gowda et al., 2014, Moore and Sears, 1994); and many more (Graham, 1976, Keeling et al., 1987, Klein et al., 2014, Olynyk and Sharpe, 1982, Schmocker et al., 2015, Spaniolas et al., 2010, Stein et al., 1996, Yalug et al., 2007).

4) Outcomes of xylophagia

Symptoms/psychological problems/health impact: A number of medical complications were reported, such as bowel perforation, cachectic and malnourishment, disturbed smell and loss of taste senses, abdominal pain, headaches, dyspnea on exertion, chronic fatigue and listlessness, colonic ischemia, peritonitis and intestinal perforation, retinitis pigmentosa, recurrent hypochromic, microcytic anemia, intestinal obstruction, and death (Bakhshaeekia et al., 2009, Bharti et al., 2015, Callinan and O'Hare, 1988, Chisholm Jr and Martín, 1981, Graham,
Various psychological problems reported include anhedonia, weeping spells, thoughts about committing suicide, restlessness, anxiety, palpitations, insomnia, loss of appetite, reduction in attention and concentration, anger outbursts, stubbornness, and self-mutilating behaviors (Bharti et al., 2015, Gowda et al., 2014). Quality of life was also impacted, with reports of decreased interest in personal and social life, reduced interaction with family members and friends, reduction of interest in pleasurable activities, poor academic performance, and slacking in household chores (Bharti et al., 2015, Gowda et al., 2014).

**Pleasurable effects:** One patient reported that eating paper resulted in feelings of satiety resulting in a reduction in food intake and weight, which then pleased the patient (Callinan and O'Hare, 1988). Similarly, eating notebook paper and newspapers was shown to be the source of immense pleasure (Gowda et al., 2014, Stein et al., 1996). However, this is not the case as one study reported a lack of pleasure from this habit (Bharti et al., 2015).

### 5) Treatment options

**Medical care:** Medical treatments recommended by the included studies comprised: prescribing drugs, surgeries or supplements, such as fluoxetine (Bharti et al., 2015); iron dextran intravenous infusion, folic acid and vitamin B<sub>12</sub> injections (Callinan and O'Hare, 1988); elemental zinc and ferrous sulphate (Chisholm Jr and Martín, 1981); paroxetine, clonazepam, baclofen, supplemental multi-vitamin injectable preparations (Gowda et al., 2014); upper gastrointestinal series, upper endoscopy, iron supplementation (Schmocker et al., 2015); clomipramine, sertraline, citalopram (Stein et al., 1996); olanzapine, fluoxetine (Yalug et al., 2007); and oral ferrous sulphate therapy (Moore and Sears, 1994, Olynyk and Sharpe, 1982).

**Psychological care/counselling:** Psychotherapy was employed in four studies, which included psychoeducation for patients and family members, cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) to reduce stress, enhance coping skills, restructure disturbing cognitions, and avoiding damaging behaviors (Bharti et al., 2015, Gowda et al., 2014), overcorrection (Foxx and Martin, 1975), and counselling regarding the disease and appropriate eating behaviors (Schmocker et al., 2015).

**Recovery rates and duration:** The findings revealed improvements in symptoms and in some cases patients were reported to be asymptomatic. Improvements in symptoms, no recurrence and aversion towards paper/cardboard
eating was seen from a minimum of one week of treatment and ranged to variable time durations of follow-ups (Callinan and O'Hare, 1988, Chisholm Jr and Martin, 1981, Gowda et al., 2014, Moore and Sears, 1994, Olynyk and Sharpe, 1982, Schmocker et al., 2015, Stein et al., 1996). However, one study revealed minimal improvements in symptoms, non-compliance, and aggravation of symptoms after 2 months of hospitalization (Yalug et al., 2007).

**Recommendations:** Despite the abnormal nature of this problem, only six research studies suggested recommendations to improve treatment or assessment of xylophagia. Studies have highlighted the absence of standardized medication regimens or psychotherapeutic interventions for treating xylophagia. According to Gowda (2014), support from family, provision of residential care, as well as fostering personal, social and environmental strengths may be beneficial for such individuals. Likewise, another research study highlighted the need for taking a detailed history of individuals presenting with such symptomatology (Spaniolas et al., 2010). Authors also suggested the inclusion of foreign body ingestion for differential diagnosis of abdominal pain (Bakhshaeekia et al., 2009). The need to address nutritional deficiencies for preventing further complications and more research studies to address management options was recommended by three included studies (Schmocker et al., 2015, Stein et al., 1996, Yalug et al., 2007).

**Discussion**

Our meta-synthesis found that precipitation of xylophagia; co-morbid psychiatric disorder; outcomes of xylophagia; treatment options comprising medical care, psychological care, counselling, and duration of recovery are the most critical points have been discussed. The serious complications of xylophagia include bowel perforation, mercury poisoning, and in one case, death (Bakhshaeekia et al., 2009, Blinder and Salama, 2008, Olynyk and Sharpe, 1982, Klein et al., 2014). Included studies also show a complex interplay of factors that might be involved in xylophagia such as, modelling of this behavior, traumatic experiences during childhood and adolescence, reinforcement and maintenance of this behavior through escape learning, insufficient attention from family members, problematic relations with members of family, and irrational beliefs about body image (Bharti et al., 2015, Callinan and O'Hare, 1988, Fisher, 2014, Gowda et al., 2014, Stein et al., 1996, Yalug et al., 2007). The findings support socio-cultural as well as biopsychiatric factors in etiology, treatment, and prevention of xylophagia specifically, and eating disorders generally.
Pica is often reported as a disorder of childhood (Blinder and Salama, 2008, Dumaguing et al., 2003, Klein et al., 2014), making up 25-33% of the cases reported worldwide (Gowda et al., 2014); with incidents rates reportedly decreasing with age. However, our findings revealed that the majority of cases (68%) are adults, with one geriatric patient (Dumaguing et al., 2003). This again points to the underlying cause of pica seen in most of these cases, which is iron-deficiency. There is also the fact that many patients feel ashamed to admit to such behavior (Spaniolas et al., 2010, Bakhshaeekia et al., 2009), a factor also observed in patients in our studies, thus delaying diagnosis until adulthood when severe complications occur. Additionally, children are rarely referred for psychiatric consultations, further delaying the appropriate diagnosis. Thus, Hergüner et al suggested that children should be sent for psychiatric assessments in the absence of underlying medical conditions, OCD, or a family history of OCD; and when iron-deficiency anemia and pica are resistant to iron therapy (Hergüner et al., 2008).

Potential impact of culture and geography

There were a total of 11 countries involved, with the majority of cases reported in developed countries (i.e., 12 respondents) (Callinan and O'Hare, 1988, Fisher, 2014, Graham, 1976, Keeling et al., 1987, Klein et al., 2014, Moore and Sears, 1994, Olynyk and Sharpe, 1982, Schmocker et al., 2015, Spaniolas et al., 2010, Uretsky, 1974) compared to developing countries (i.e., 7 respondents) (Bakhshaeekia et al., 2009, Bharti et al., 2015, Gowda et al., 2014, Stein et al., 1996, Yalug et al., 2007, Fotoulaki et al., 2007). This discrepancy might be a result of more sufficient medical access and knowledge regarding pica as a disorder in developed countries. In a study determining the prevalence rates of psychiatric morbidity in children and adolescents in India where pica is one of the diagnoses, those in urban slum areas had the lowest prevalence rates compared to those in urban areas. This phenomenon might be due to the absence of awareness pertaining to significant psychiatric issues, greater acceptance for deviance, worsened living conditions and the occurrence of various stressors (Srinath et al., 2005). A study by Kettaneh et al also found that being non-European was an independent risk factor for pica, with the authors suggesting that the low incidence in Europeans was either because pica is rare in these patients, or due to the unwillingness to admit to pica because of cultural traits (Kettaneh et al., 2005). As previously mentioned, in some ethnic groups, pica is culturally acceptable, such as in Turkey and Africa where women were encouraged to eat clay to increase their fertility (al-Kanhal and Bani, 1995, Derman et al., 2005).

Underlying etiologies
The majority of patients in the included studies had either iron deficiency or iron deficiency anemia (IDA). This parallels clinical reports as well as findings in the literature that have pointed to the role of iron deficiency, and not necessarily IDA, in the development of pica (Olynyk and Sharpe, 1982, Lumish et al., 2014, Hergüner et al., 2008). Indeed in the study by Foutulaki et al, the pica was due to IDA secondary to celiac disease (Fotoulaki et al., 2007), which damages the small intestine where iron is absorbed; and is nonresponsive to iron therapy (Freeman, 2015). One theory postulated restoring, which describes pica as the body’s reaction to deficiency (Klein et al., 2014). This then underlines the importance of first excluding and treating underlying and organic causes of pica before initiating psychiatric therapy (Fotoulaki et al., 2007, Dumaguing et al., 2003). There is however debate as to which came first, with some authors arguing that the consumption of non-nutritive substances in itself led to a loss in appetite which then results in iron deficiency. This was seen in the Callinan paper where cardboard chewing was believed to render fullness which in turn resulted in reduced food intake, consequently impairing iron absorption (Callinan and O'Hare, 1988). It is also postulated that the consumption of these materials may have resulted in an inhibition of iron absorption, thus leading to iron deficiency (Moore and Sears, 1994). Nevertheless, in most of the cases studied in the present meta-synthesis, individuals with iron-deficiency were cured or at least showed improvement in xylophagia after treatment with iron supplementation. However, although a possible relationship between pica and iron-deficiency has been shown, for now, the mechanism is still unclear (Callinan and O'Hare, 1988, Chisholm Jr and Martin, 1981, Moore and Sears, 1994, Olynyk and Sharpe, 1982, Schmocker et al., 2015).

A few patients had intellectual disabilities, which supports previous reports that pica is more prevalent in patients with mental disabilities, including having a higher mortality rate (Dumaguing et al., 2003, Klein et al., 2014, Hergüner et al., 2008). Indeed it was noted that worldwide 10-15% of those with pica have learning disabilities (Gowda et al., 2014). It has been postulated that this is due to diminished impulse regulation, which is a critical clinical characteristic in pica (Gundogar et al., 2003, Stein et al., 1996). The Stein patient had a comorbidity of OCD (Stein et al., 1996), while other patients reported symptoms of compulsions (Schmocker et al., 2015, Yalug et al., 2007, Moore and Sears, 1994); which again parallels previous findings which have attributed pica to OCD or obsessive-compulsive traits (Gundogar et al., 2003, Dumaguing et al., 2003, Bharti et al., 2015). Indeed in instances where iron therapy failed, the use of a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor was shown to be effective (Bharti et al., 2015, Gowda et al., 2014, Yalug et al., 2007). Other reported predisposing factors include schizophrenia (Gowda et
al., 2014, Hergüner et al., 2008), seen in two cases (Dumaguing et al., 2003, Klein et al., 2014); as well as those with a family history of pica, also seen in two cases (Schmocker et al., 2015, Bharti et al., 2015).

**Recommendation for early prevention**

Early detection of xylophagia can help in preventing complications (Singh et al., 2015). As primary prevention, pica should be screened by conducting prevalence surveys, direct observation, stool checks, medical history review, interviewing caregivers, and using screening scales such as the Behavior Problem Inventory in clinical programs and residential facilities (Williams and McAdam, 2012). Those who work where they will interact with people with pica should also be taught about what pica is, the dangers of ingestion of such non-food substances and the prevention strategies (Williams et al., 2009). Family members can also play a role by paying closer attention to patient’s behavior, and seeking medical advice immediately if any unusual habits are observed. Parents should also periodically check for any tooth deterioration that might be a result of pica behavior (Singh et al., 2015).

**Implications for future research, policy and practice**

This meta-synthesis shows that there are many challenges associated with diagnosing pica because of limited data on its characteristics, medical and psychological assessments, and management. Patients also often present with nonspecific signs and symptoms which may make it hard to detect as well as lead to misdiagnosis and unnecessary treatment (Bharti et al., 2015). This is aggravated by the fact that most patients conceal this behavior and seek medical assistance only after complications occur (Spaniolas et al., 2010), as seen in three cases (Bharti et al., 2015, Schmocker et al., 2015, Graham, 1976); or a proper history could not be obtained, especially in cases of intellectual disability or children (Bakhshaeekia et al., 2009). Various biopsychiatric and sociocultural components have been shown in this review (i.e., familial factors, maintaining factors, co-morbid conditions, psychological problems as outcomes and treatment options) which support the notion that these aspects operate simultaneously in additive, multiplicative, and/or transactional ways. Thus by being cognizant of socioeconomic factors, as well as detecting xylophagia in the early stages, prevention can be achieved and complications can be avoided. More clinical examples are also required to analyze whether pica is more prone to happen in developing or developed countries, as there is a possibility that the cases in developing countries are not reported because of poor access to medical resources and/or naivety towards the characteristic of pica.
Currently, the treatment for xylophagia is limited, and in most cases, patients are treated with oral iron therapy, antidepressants, or by surgically removing the intestinal bezoars. From a medico-legal perspective, the focus of treatment should be on the main disorder and correcting the causal deficiencies or emphasizes the complication (Moore and Sears, 1994). In some cases, a combination of antipsychotic medication and cognitive behavior therapy is opted (Knecht, 2000).

Overcorrection procedures have also been used, but only with the institutionalized patients. The fact that pica is associated with obsessions and compulsions also suggest the need for behavioral treatment (Dumaguing et al., 2003). Further studies, however, are still warranted to investigate the effectiveness of other possible treatments. As it pertains to the substance consumed, it is important to gather information on the specific type that was consumed in terms of brand names, as different brands of the same product may contain different materials, which could lead to different outcomes. In the same vein, while it may all come under the umbrella term of xylophagia, consuming pages of a book would have different consequences from consuming toilet paper. Thus explored and collected information collected should be as specific and detailed as possible (Young et al., 2008).

The unusual intake of foreign inedible substances by medical imaging and post-mortem examination with concurrent non-existence of role of external party or influence of medication, illegal drugs, or intoxicating substances, allows an effective explanation of the findings in the background of a complicated biopsychosocial clinical picture. As pica is not commonly known and often asymptomatic, patients might continue practicing the habit until complications occur. As such, there should also be a concerted effort to promote the awareness of pica and its possible consequences to both the public and health professionals. More well-designed trials should also be carried out to understand the characteristics and risk factors of xylophagia in order to facilitate early detection and prevention, as well as diagnosis.

**Limitation**

There are some limitations to this meta-synthesis. One limitation was the lack of in-depth exploration of the phenomenon in the included studies. Studies did not explain the results of psychological assessment in details, and there was an absence of follow-up monitoring to confirm the efficacy of treatments offered. Furthermore, the term “xylophagia” was rarely used in the articles; instead, the specific substance consumed was mentioned, possibly increasing the difficulty in retrieving related studies as xylophagia encompasses a wide range of substance that can
be consumed. Out of 18 studies included in this meta-synthesis, 15 studies were case reports, showing a dearth of empirical studies with detailed qualitative or mixed-methodology to highlight the underpinnings of xylophagia.

Conclusions

The commonly reported causes and triggers of xylophagia are behavior modelling through vicarious learning and post-traumatic disorder suffered during childhood and adolescence. It has been found that xylophagia is often associated with other diseases such as iron-deficiency and various psychiatric disorders. A positive effect of patient and family members undergoing psychology counselling or cognitive behavior therapy in reducing stress and enhancing coping skills thus avoiding self-damaging behaviors has been established. However, out of the 18 included studies, only four employed psychotherapy. Similarly, standardized medication regimens for treating xylophagia are still not available and further research is still required to better understand the disease. Furthermore, there must be a thorough assessment of medical, conceptual and explorational histories for any indication of pica that may assist in post-mortem examination and may also give relevant details of linked medical and psychiatric problems. This thorough assessment can help to overcome the chances of overlooking or misdiagnosis due to the presence of transient or mild symptoms or the occurrence of overlapping symptoms.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Disclosure of potential conflicts of interest

All authors have no conflict of interest.

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