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Clinical Image

Heck's Disease: A Clinical Image

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Heck's disease (focal epithelial hyperplasia [FEH]) is a rare benign condition of the oral mucosa caused by human papillomavirus (HPV) subtypes 13 or 32. [1,2] First described by Archard and Heck in 1965 among Inuit and Native American children, it has since been documented worldwide, including in Nigeria. [1,3]

A 5-year-old boy from the Yoruba ethnic group in Ondo State, South-West Nigeria, presented to the Children Out-Patient Department of the University of Medical Sciences Teaching Hospital (UNIMEDTH) with a two-year history of multiple painless, non-itchy oral lesions. He was the first of three children in a monogamous family setting, with no similar lesions reported in other family members. His medical history was notable for hepatitis B infection with an undetectable viral load. Intraoral examination revealed widespread soft, smooth to ragged papular and nodular lesions involving the buccal mucosa, gingiva, and lips, ranging from 1 mm to 2 cm (**Figures 1–4**). Extraoral examination was unremarkable.

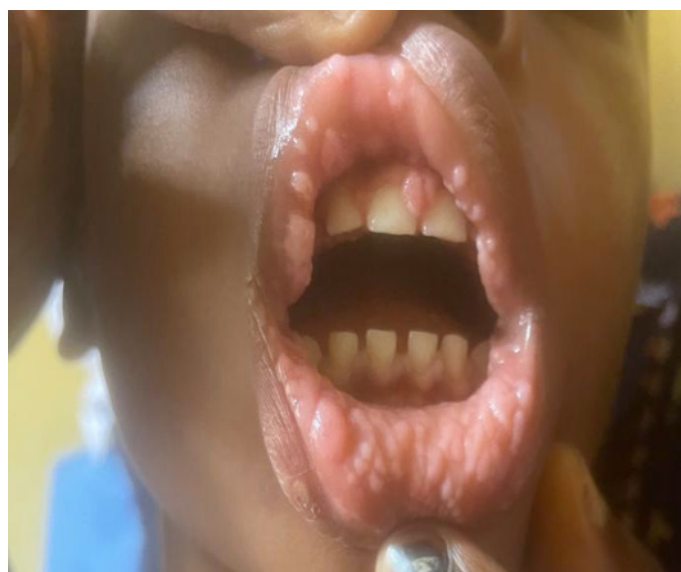


Figure 1: Multiple papular and nodular lesions on the labial, buccal mucosa, and gingiva.

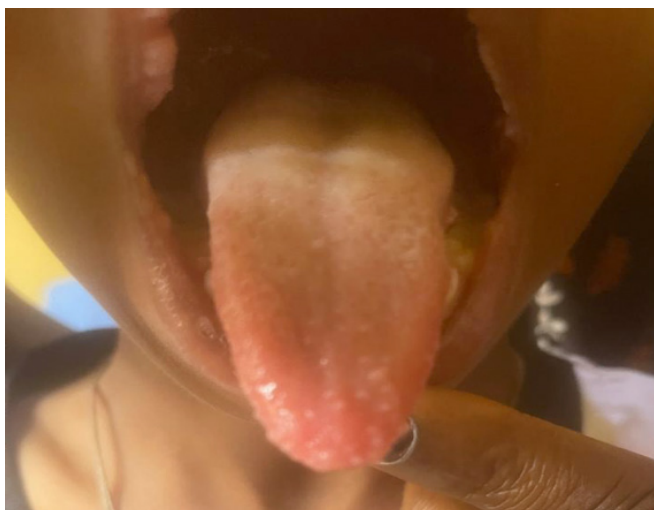


Figure 2: Lesions on the lateral and dorsal surfaces of the tongue.



Figure 3: Nodular swellings on the labial mucosa of the lower lip.

Laboratory investigations showed negative screening for HIV, hepatitis C, and HPV; the negative HPV result likely reflects limited test sensitivity for subtypes 13/32. Differential diagnoses, including oral warts (verruca vulgaris), multiple fibromas, and condyloma acuminatum, were considered and excluded clinically. Histopathological examination and HPV genotyping were unavailable due to resource constraints; the diagnosis was therefore established on clinical grounds alone, an approach well-supported in the literature. [3–5]

The parents were counselled on the benign, self-limiting nature of the condition and its potential for spontaneous regression. Oral zinc supplementation (20 mg daily for 8 weeks) was commenced, given its documented role in immune modulation and regression of Heck's disease in similar pediatric patients. [4] No surgical intervention was indicated. Follow-up is pending.



Figure 4: Widespread smooth and ragged lesions involving the labial and buccal mucosa.

This case underscores the importance of recognizing Heck's disease in the differential diagnosis of multiple oral lesions in pediatric patients in sub-Saharan Africa. Although previously documented in Nigeria, the condition remains rare and under-recognized in the region, and this case demonstrates that a confident clinical diagnosis is achievable even in resource-limited settings based on characteristic multifocal, painless papulo-nodular lesions in a child.

LEARNING POINTS

- Heck's disease should be considered in children presenting with multiple, painless oral papulo-nodular lesions, especially in low-resource settings where confirmatory testing may be unavailable.
- A confident clinical diagnosis is often sufficient, allowing clinicians to avoid unnecessary invasive procedures and provide appropriate reassurance.
- Recognizing its benign and self-limiting nature is essential to prevent overtreatment, while simple measures such as observation or adjunctive therapies like zinc may support resolution.
- Increased awareness is needed to reduce under-recognition of this condition in sub-Saharan Africa and similar contexts.

CONSENT

Written informed consent was obtained from the patient's parents for the publication of this report.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

All authors contributed to the completion of this work. The final manuscript was read and approved by all authors.

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None.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

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