

Research Note

Four cases of pediculosis caused by *Pthirus pubis* Linnaeus, 1758 (Diptera: Anoplura) from peninsular Malaysia

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Abstract. Four cases of pediculosis, two in adults and two in children, caused by the crab-louse, *Pthirus pubis* Linnaeus, 1758 (Diptera: Anoplura) is reported from peninsular Malaysia. This is the second report of the problem to be documented from the country. Although *P. pubis* is closely associated with genital hairs, it is, however, also found to occur on the eyelashes, eyebrows, hairs of the body, head and axilla. The few reported cases of phthiriasis probably do not reflect the true situation.

The sucking louse (Insecta: Anoplura) are generally small, wingless, dorso-ventrally flattened obligate insects. The order Anoplura contains 536 species, several with a cosmopolitan distribution (Dunce & Musser, 1994). Three species, the body louse, *Pediculus humanus* Linnaeus, 1758 and the head louse, *Pediculus capitis* De Geer, 1778 (Pediculidae) and the crab louse, *Pthirus pubis* Linnaeus, 1758 (Pthiridae) parasitize humans. However, the body louse has not been reported to occur in peninsular Malaysia.

Whilst several reports documenting human infestation with *P. capitis* are extant for peninsular Malaysia (Busvine & Reid, 1949; Wharton & Abu Hassan, 1959; Sinniah *et al.*, 1981, 1983, 1984; Sinniah & Sinniah, 1982), only one publication deals with the occurrence of *P. pubis* here (Wan Omar *et al.*, 1993).

The present paper reports four cases of pediculosis caused by *P. pubis* from peninsular Malaysia.

Louse specimens obtained from patients seeking medical attention at the Ophthalmology Clinic of a local hospital, were sent to our department for identification. Specimens (nits, nymphs and adults) received were preserved in 70% ethyl alcohol, and were directly placed in Hoyer's medium on glass slides, covered with glass cover slips and examined under compound microscope; or were mounted in Canada balsam after initial processing that involves passage through increasing grades of ethyl alcohol (80%, 90% and 100%) for 20-30 minutes each for purpose of dehydration and then cleared for about 20 minutes in clove oil. Identification was based on criteria in Ibarra (1993) and also compared with reference collection maintained in the

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Cases reports

The first patient, an Indian female, aged 37 years, on physical examination had bilateral blepharitis and nits attached to the eyelashes.

The second patient, a Malay male, aged 29 years, complained of itchiness in the left eye, head, body and pubic area. Adults and nymphs were obtained from these areas.

The third patient, an European female, aged 4 years, on examination was seen to have blood engorged louse on the eyelashes.

The fourth patient, an Indian female, aged 7 years, experienced itch in both eyes for duration of two weeks. Louse were seen on eyelashes, eyebrows and scalp. A female louse each from each area was submitted for identification.

Specimens from all four cases were identified as *P. pubis*.

Up to date, one report documenting *P. pubis* infestation in peninsular Malaysia is available (Wan Omar *et al.*, 1993). The authors report finding 72 nymphs, 45 females and 27 males of *P. pubis* in the night garment worn by five bachelors who slept in the main author's residence. They further, collected 60 females and 21 males seen crawling on the sponge mattress used by the bachelors. Examination of the bachelors revealed the presence of nine louse on the scalp and three on the eyelashes of one individual and heavy infestation of only nits in the pubic areas of the others.

The present report documents *P. pubis* infestation in 4 individuals (two adults and two children). Bilateral blepharitis was seen in one case, the others experienced pruritus in the eye, head/scalp, body and pubic area (one case). The pubic louse is adapted for clinging on to coarse body hair, including eyelashes, eyebrow, axillary hair and especially pubic hairs. Occasionally they are found on head hairs.

Pthirus pubis has a cosmopolitan distribution and some authorities consider it occurring on the gorilla (Ibarra, 1993).

However, Durden & Musser (1994) recognize the species on the gorilla, *Gorilla gorilla* (Pongidae) as belonging to another species, *Pthirus gorillae* Ewing, 1927. It occurs on gorilla in Rwanda and Zaire in Africa (Durden & Musser, 1994).

It seems that within the house it is common for *P. pubis* to be transferred to the eyelashes of young children from infested adults (Ibarra, 1993). Faeces of *P. pubis* in the eyelid can be a cause of blepharitis (Ibarra, 1993). Although *P. pubis* is not known to transmit any human pathogens, its presence can be a cause of intense itchiness and be a cause of uncontrolled scratching which can produce excoriation and secondary bacterial infection.

Incidence of pediculosis caused by *P. pubis* is probably more frequent than it appears. A systematic survey of patients visiting venereal disease clinics may disclose the true situation regarding its incidence in peninsular Malaysia.

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