

# First Cousin Marriages in Pakistan — Are We Suicidal?!

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First-cousin (consanguineous) marriages are very common in Pakistan. As per published data, the rate of such marriages is about 50 percent<sup>1</sup>. In reality, it is over 70 percent. An honest country-wide survey is required. Cousin marriages are highly prevalent in rural areas. During a short survey in rural Sindh, when respondents were told that children of both paternal and maternal uncles and aunts are your first cousins and should not be married to, the answer was amazing. Most of them said, "then who is left?". It is said that marrying outside the close family may lead to being labeled "Kari (honour killing)"<sup>3</sup>.

It is a fact that genetic diseases are much more common in the children born in close communities and first-cousin marriages<sup>1-2</sup>. One in four children will have the disease if both parents are carriers of a particular disease<sup>1,4</sup>. The chances of becoming a carrier are higher in cousins<sup>1</sup>. Just to name a few genetic diseases -- thalassemia, muscular dystrophy, neuropathies, cystic fibrosis, osteogenesis imperfecta, and mental disabilities (special children) are common in Pakistan<sup>1-2</sup>. Clinical observations by ENT surgeons performing cochlear implantation suggest that most children presenting with congenital deafness are born in first-cousin marriages, reflecting the strong association between consanguinity and hereditary hearing loss<sup>5</sup>.

Thalassemia used to be very common in Cyprus, where close community marriages are common. About seventy years ago, they made a law and implemented it. All brides and grooms must undergo hemoglobin electrophoresis. Both must be a carrier<sup>6</sup>. Only one or none could be carriers to eradicate thalassemia. This disease is now rare in Cyprus. Pakistan also has the law of premarital hemoglobin electrophoresis<sup>7</sup>. It is implemented hardly anywhere.

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In England, first cousin marriages are still common in Pakistani-origin families living in Bradford, Manchester, and Birmingham. The increased incidence of genetic diseases in these areas led to an enquiry (BBC documentary). The British parliament discussed this issue of unnecessary burden on the NHS and warned against first-cousin marriages<sup>4</sup>. Now the concerned families hide the consanguinity!

First cousin marriages also lead to sub-fertility and an increased rate of miscarriages, nature's act to avoid "special children"<sup>1</sup>. Parsi people hardly marry outside the community. Their number is ever decreasing. In Pakistan, out of 100 marriages, 70 are consanguineous<sup>8</sup>. Suppose each marriage produces four children. Thirty non-consanguineous marriages will produce 120 reasonably normal children. Seventy consanguineous marriages will produce 280 children. Out of these 280, seventy will have some kind of genetic disease. This is almost one in seven children born in Pakistan being genetically abnormal. This is preventable. And we have not given it a serious thought. Are we not suicidal?!

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