In the past, I have written on this subject. After the experience of my last patient, I am convinced that the doctors should learn more about pre-herpetic neuralgia, since post herpetic neuralgia has been taught for years together and is a well established entity.

I am writing about this patient in whom I missed the diagnosis, inspite of having talked about this illness for so many years.

An elderly lady, about 65 years of age rang me up from Pune. Her complaint was that she had pain in the right side of the neck, radiating to the right shoulder, of 4 days duration. There were no other complaints at all. I told her to start using a cervical collar because most likely these are root pains caused due to cervical spondylosis. Next day, she went to a skin specialist, who diagnosed Herpes Zoster.

During her next telephone call, I asked her why she had not mentioned the skin rash to me, when I had specifically asked her the question “Have you any other complaints?” At that time, her answer was “no”.

Later on, when she called, she mentioned that on the 4th day, she had severe pain for which she had applied some ointment. According to her, on the morning of the 4th day, when a few pimples appeared, she thought they were due to reaction of the ointment, which she had applied for the pain. I learnt a lesson that next time, if a patient complains of symptoms of severe root pain over the telephone, I would ask a positive question to the patient, i.e. “Have you noticed any pimples in the area of the pain?” If only I had asked that question, I would have diagnosed Herpes Zoster because it is a common mistake done by the patients and doctors to blame a drug for rash.

I have noticed the same thing in patients of Lupus (SLE), where the rash was due to the disease, but was attributed to drug allergy.

One thing is definite that root pains of Herpes Zoster are so severe that they can be diagnosed even over the telephone. The rash is in the form of pimples, which might start appearing on the 2nd, 3rd or even the 4th day, as in the case of the above-mentioned patient.

Reference