The Traditional Healer Resurfaces

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A study by Daniels et al. [1] in collaboration with the Boland Municipality in Western Cape of South Africa, realized that in the farming communities the cure rate of Tuberculosis (TB) was 100 for every 10,000 members. This prompted them to sponsor a member of the farming community for lay health worker. He went through Adult Basic Education training. The objectives of his training and responsibilities were to: (i) create affordable and easy access to farm workers and their families in early detection of TB, (ii) maintain good client relationship through communication (especially where he was able to speak their language), and (iii) understand their problems within the context of their environment. To sum up, the objectives were to give a real care to his patients. A set up of this nature is seen in the traditional healers (THs) who are common on the African continent.

The THs services refer to the application of knowledge, skills and practices based on the experiences indigenous to different cultures. Their services are aimed at maintaining health as well as preventing, diagnosing and improving physical and mental illness. THs include herbalists, faith healers and practitioners of Chinese or Ayurvedic medicine.

Several studies [2-6] indicate that majority of people attend to these THs well before they attend a conventional health care service. THs by reason of their accessibility are known to be consulted when confronted even with contagious and debilitating diseases [5] and so remain central to the lives of many people. Fortunately, they often do not demand cash upfront.

Beyond easy access and care is the high cost of conventional health care service for which many cannot afford, as well as the fact that traditional healing is linked to the African belief systems. This makes it imperative to see a TH whether or not a person can even afford the conventional health care service. THs are known to be consulted when waiting times during treatment, caring attitude and home visits. Death rate of THs patients was 6%, as compared 18% of others.

For the above reasons and many others, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 80% of people in Africa regularly seek the services of THs. They have become very significant because they are accessible, affordable, socially acceptable compared to the formally trained workers of the conventional health care service [6].

Integration, therefore, of THs in the overall medical system cannot be over-emphasized. It is not only their care, easy access and affordable cost but also the opportunity of research into the herbs they use, which could be useful. Considering the fact that certain drugs are no longer effective in the treatment of TB, the development of new drugs from herbs through collaboration of THs would be fruitful.

It is reasoned that because THs often have poor biomedical knowledge, the use of traditional medicine have often caused patients to suffer serious complications. Others argue that because THs have poor skills and inadequate documentation of safety or efficacy of their services they cannot convince governments to support them. On the other hand some believe that with collaboration, reports of new cases to prescribed treatments when supervised by THs, thereby preventing multidrug resistant TB. Their inclusion in medical and educational outreach and training for the needed health information may therefore be appropriate. Such training will help THs to play an important role.

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in improving TB detection and combating other kinds of diseases. Several TB patients agree that THs should be included in health care as supervisors [14].

There are several concerted efforts to bring THs into a legal framework in many countries. South Africa Parliament has approved a law recognizing them as health providers who would offer treatment for numerous conditions [5]. The government of Zimbabwe has indicated its resolve to regularize their operations [5]. In Ghana THs have formed an association known as the Ghana Psychic and Traditional Healers Association, which is recognized by the government [15].

Substantial successes that have been reported in several areas give evidence to the benefit both sides and the community at large would enjoy when the potential collaboration between THs and conventional health care providers is carefully exploited. THs on the other hand, would like to work with conventional health care providers as long as their skills, views and opinions are respected [16].

References