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Waris Qidwai

Aga Khan University, waris.qidwai@aku.edu

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Original Article

USE OF THE SERVICES OF SPIRITUAL HEALERS AMONG PATIENTS PRESENTING TO FAMILY PHYSICIANS AT A TEACHING HOSPITAL IN KARACHI, PAKISTAN

Waris Qidwai*

ABSTRACT

Objective: To study the use of the services of spiritual healers, among patients visiting the family physicians, at a teaching hospital in, Karachi.

Design: Cross-sectional survey

Place and Duration of study: Family practice center, the Aga Khan University, Karachi, from February to June, 2001

Subjects and Methods: A total of 387 patients were surveyed. A questionnaire was developed and administered to collect information on the use of the services of spiritual healers among the respondents.

Results: Most of the respondents were young, well educated and better placed socio-economically. The use of the services of spiritual healers was found in 45 (11.6%) of the respondents. Recommendation of someone, having belief in spiritual healers, doctors could not cure and spiritual healers are reliable and effective were stated to be the reasons for consulting them. Reasons given by 342 respondents (88.3%) for not consulting the spiritual healers included lack of belief in spiritual healers, allopaths are more effective, spiritual healers are un-scientific and not considered a treatment option. With regards to the future use of the services of spiritual healers, 29 (64.4%) of the respondents indicated their willingness to see them, if needed.

Conclusions: We have documented the use of the services of spiritual healers with important implications for medical practice.

KEY-WORDS: Spiritual healers-faith healers-spirituality in healing

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INTRODUCTION

Spirituality has been associated with a variety of positive health outcomes¹. It has been

shown that in those with chronic illnesses, spiritual healing causes improvement in the quality of life². Also a strong religious faith in healing has been reported³.

Faith healers in Pakistan have been reported to be the major source of care for people with mental health problems, particularly women with little education⁴. Similar findings have been reported from neighboring India^{5,6}. It has been documented that Pakistani community even when settled in United Kingdom, continue to consult faith healers, for mental health issues⁷. On the contrary, there are reports that in rural Punjab, spiritual healers are not consulted for the treatment of acute respiratory illness⁸.

We therefore, established the need to study the use of the services of spiritual healers,

* Dr. Waris Qidwai MBBS, MCPS, FCPS
Associate Professor
Family Medicine Department,
The Aga Khan University,
Karachi, Pakistan

Correspondence:

Dr. Waris Qidwai
Associate Professor, Family Medicine,
The Aga Khan University
Stadium Road, P.O. Box: 3500,
Karachi 74800, Pakistan
E-Mail: waris@akunet.org

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among patients presenting to family physicians, at the Aga Khan University hospital, Karachi

PATIENTS AND METHODS

The study was carried out at the Community Health Center, of The Aga Khan University Hospital, Karachi, from February to June 2001. The Community Health Center is a Family practice facility, where approximately 150 general practice patients are seen daily by family physicians.

It was a cross sectional survey of 387 patients. A questionnaire was developed and administered to collect patient's utilization of the services of spiritual healers. Data on the demographic parameters of the patients was collected to look at the background of the study population.

Written consent was taken from those participating in the study after they agreed to fill the questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered by the study author and trained volunteers. Epi-info and SPSS computer software were used for the data management.

Sample size estimation

Sample size estimated based on following assumptions for cross-sectional surveys⁹:

Population size: 3600

Estimated prevalence: 50%

+/-Maximum error: 5%

Sample size: 347

RESULTS

Three hundred eighty-seven (387) patients were surveyed against an estimated sample size of 347. The demographic profile of the study population is listed in Table-I. The use of the services of spiritual healers was found in 45 (11.6%) of the respon-

TABLE - I

Demographic Profile of the Study Population
Visiting Community Health Center of AKUH
(n=387)

S. No.	Parameter	Number (Percent)
1.	Sex:	
	Males	168 (43)
	Females	219 (57)
2.	Mean Age (SD*) (In years)	32.6 (10.66)
3.	Marital Status:	
	Single	148 (38)
	Married	235 (61)
	Others	04 (1.0)
4.	Educational Status:	
	Illiterate	25 (06)
	Primary	20 (05)
	Secondary	44 (12)
	Matriculation	84 (22)
	Intermediate	81 (21)
	Graduate	89 (23)
	Post-graduate	35 (09)
	Diploma	09 (02)
5.	Occupational status:	
	Private service	85 (22)
	Government service	19 (5)
	Self employed	45 (12)
	Student	74 (19)
	Labourer	7 (2)
	Unemployed	36 (9)
	Others including housewives	121 (31)

* Standard deviation

dents. Musculo-skeletal problems, high blood pressure & angina, headaches, fever and jaundice were the main conditions for consulting them (Table-II).

Recommendation of someone, having belief in spiritual healers, doctors could not cure and spiritual healers are reliable and effective were stated to be the reasons for consulting them (Table-III).

TABLE - II

Types of ailments resulting in consultation with spiritual healer (n =45)

S. No.	Parameter	Number * (Percent)
1.	Musculo-skeletal problem	11 (24)
2.	High Blood pressure & Angina	11 (24)
3.	Headache	10 (22)
4.	Fever	6 (13)
5.	Jaundice and hepatitis	5 (11)
6.	Diabetes Mellitus	3 (6)
7.	Epilepsy	3 (6)
8.	Gastro-intestinal problems	3 (6)
9.	Eye diseases	2 (4)
10.	Asthma and Pneumonia	1 (2)
11.	Sexual problem	1 (2)

* Some respondent reported more than one ailment

TABLE - III

List of reasons for consultation with spiritual healers (n=45)

S. No.	Parameter	Number (Percent)
1.	Recommended by someone	38 (84.4)
2.	Have belief in spiritual healers	04 (9)
3.	Doctor could not cure	01 (2.2)
4.	Spiritual healers are reliable	01 (2.2)
5.	Effective health care provider	01 (2.2)

Lack of belief in spiritual healers, allopaths are more effective, spiritual healers are un-scientific and not considered a treatment option were stated to be the main reasons for not consulting spiritual healers among 342 (88.3%) of the respondents (Table-IV).

With regards to the use of the services of spiritual healers, 29(64.4%) of the respondents indicated their willingness to see them again in future, if needed.

TABLE - IV

List of reasons for non-consultation with spiritual healers (n=342)

S. No.	Parameter	Number (Percent)
1.	Don't believe in spiritual healers	282 (82.5)
2.	Allopaths are more effective	20 (5.8)
3.	Spiritual healers are not scientific	16 (4.7)
4.	Don't consider spiritual healers as treatment option	14 (4.0)
5.	Spiritual healers are not effective	04 (1.2)
6.	Prefer other treatment methods	04 (1.2)
7.	Difficult to find effective spiritual healers	01 (0.3)
8.	Treatment is long and results are slow to appear	01 (0.3)

DISCUSSION

The demographic profile of the study population shows that the majority was young, well educated and better placed socio-economically than the rest of the population.

In the community, because of the demographic features, we would expect to find the use of the services of spiritual healers more than that of modern western medicine. This assumption is based on the common knowledge that the utilization of the services of spiritual healers is more in the lower strata of the society⁴. Since these respondents were visiting a facility offering allopathic services, we again expect to find more use of services of the spiritual healers in the community.

There are reports that the use of the services

of spiritual healers is more in Islamic society¹⁰. The use of the services of spiritual healers was found in 45 (11.6%) of the respondents, which emphasizes the importance of this traditional system of healthcare. It has been documented that the use of these services are prevalent among Pakistanis⁴. Substantial use of the services of faith healers is reported in neighboring India¹¹. In rural Bangladesh, population is reported to depend upon the services of spiritual healers, on account of the shortage of qualified allopaths¹².

It is for these reasons that it is suggested that an understanding of the background and benefits of alternative therapy is important to all health care professionals¹³.

We have also found the common conditions for which treatment from spiritual healers is sought. It could be because spiritual healers treat them better in comparison to other systems of health care professionals. Further studies are recommended to find out exactly why patients prefer to seek treatment from spiritual healers for certain conditions.

The most common reason for consulting spiritual healers is someone's recommendation, which could mean that experiences of people in the community, with regards to consultation with them have been favorable or it could even be the result of a strong marketing influence. It would be important to find out exact reasons forming the basis for the recommendation. The other reasons for consulting spiritual healers are the good qualities attached to them by the users such as being effective and reliable.

The reasons for not consulting spiritual healers include unfavorable features supposedly associated with them such as lack of effectiveness, and not being scientific, leading to lack of belief in them. It is again important to understand the exact reasons for such beliefs.

Since a significant number of patients in the community are using alternative medicine therapies, it is recommended that physicians should ask their patients about their use of alternative medicine and advise them accordingly¹⁴.

Faith healers are reported to treat and prevent different conditions^{11,15}. It would be interesting to see where such therapies and prevention strategies stand in today's era of evidence-based medicine. There are calls for cooperation between spiritual healers and the westernized health care workers, in order to augment cancer prevention efforts¹⁵.

It is open to debate whether seeking treatment from spiritual healers delays patients from getting appropriate care from the modern western medicine. It is needed to be studied, as to how many cancer patients reach the un-curable stage because of such delay. One wonders how many patients with tuberculosis are kept away from getting the appropriate treatment, because they prefer to visit the spiritual healers who are known to attract their patients because of their spiritual approach to the medical problem¹⁶.

CONCLUSION

We have documented the use of the services of spiritual healers among patients seeking treatment from allopathic practitioners. The utilization of such services is substantial and therefore there is a need for further studies in this area. It is expected that the findings of our study will lead to further debate on the issue with favorable outcome.

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