

ENHANCING THE RELEVANCE OF TRADITIONAL HEALERS IN CANCER MANAGEMENT: EVIDENCE FOR COLLABORATION IN HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

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Abstract

Traditional healers provide client-centered, personalized health care that is culturally appropriate, holistic and tailored to meet the needs and expectations of the patient. Considering the vitality and benevolent nature of traditional healers, they are yet to be fully recognized by western biomedical practitioners for effective collaboration. This qualitative study aimed to assess cancer patients and traditional healers' conception of cancer, its cause(s), treatment effectiveness, as well as their opinion about collaboration between western medical practitioners and traditional healers as part of overall health care system. The study employs indepth interview method. Thirty-nine (39) people participated in the study, 13 traditional healers, 9 western medical practitioners and 16 cancer patients who had seen both traditional healers and western medical practitioners. The audio taped recorded responses thematically analyzed. This study revealed four roles traditional healers play in cancer treatment - medicinal healer, emotional comforter, spiritual guide, and palliative caregiver. Emotional and spiritual roles may augment the effectiveness of medical treatment. Cancer awareness and education programs need to position traditional healers as complementary, rather than an alternative to Western medical treatment. Validating the roles Traditional Healers can play in cancer treatment there is need for a closer collaboration between healers and western physicians to enhance better care for cancer patients. This has implication for policy makers who will facilitate the relationship in order to control cancer care and improve the quality of care of cancer patients in Nigeria.

Keywords: Traditional healer, cancer, biomedical, collaboration, Ile-Ife

Introduction

Traditional healers occupy an esteemed position within African culture as they are consulted for a wide range of physical, social, and emotional problems. Traditional healers are so embedded in the culture that they are sometimes the first source of treatment for cancer patients (Sobowale et al 2013). It has also been estimated that 65% of population in third world countries patronizes traditional healers for cancer treatment despite the increasing presence of western medical practitioners. They provide client-centered, personalized health care that is culturally appropriate, holistic and tailored to meet the needs and expectations of the patient ((Eluyemi

2019). Considering the vitality and benevolent nature of traditional healers, brings about call for collaboration with medical practitioners. This follows the call to promote the inclusion and integration of traditional practitioners in national health programmes assesses collaborations between traditional healing and medical health care across sub-Saharan Africa (Adeyemi 2016). Studies indicate such collaborations are complex and often ineffective (Kalejaiye 2016). For many years, traditional healers' practices have received limited consideration from western medical practitioners demanding more scientific evidence. Western medical practitioners believe that traditional healers' practices are rather "primitive", as they are not scientifically grounded; and their works are not subjected to research and scrutiny by the human resource council.(Badejo 2019; Adeyemi 2016). This has been an issue that constitutes barrier to effective collaboration (Courtright 2000).

Barriers to effective collaboration include distrust, perceptions of superiority, inadequate formal policy recognition and regulation, and unacceptance of mutual responsibility. Pathways to better collaboration require providing solutions to the above barriers (King 2006). The question of the specific competence and effectiveness of traditional healers in managing chronic disease especially, cancer is frequently raised by the western medical practitioners. This has been constituting a challenge to collaborations (Duru 2016; Ijaodola 2015). Traditional healers expressed a lack of appreciation from Western biomedical practitioners Traditional healers have not been recognized, symbolically and materially, through basic aid and equipment. Traditional healers may bring symptom relief and psychological and spiritual comfort to terminal patients (Rasaki 2018). We need a solid understanding of the roles and practices of traditional healers so that health practitioners in both systems can better acknowledge appreciate each other and address patient healthcare, especially with regard to life-threatening chronic disease like cancer.

An enduring component of the primary healthcare system in Nigeria is the alternative healthcare system, which is made up of the traditional and faith based healers. In spite of the presence of western medicine in the primary healthcare system in Nigeria, it has been observed that traditional medicine in whatever form is being used and it is still popular among 70% of the population (Nortje et al 2016). Despite the widespread presence of traditional healers in Nigeria, little has been done in Nigeria with regards to understanding traditional healers' conception, diagnosis (perceived causes) and treatment of cancer. Knowing that understanding these would constitute fora to facilitate the negotiation of respectful collaborative relationships, and inform policy formulation. In the consideration of the above, this study was designed to assess cancer patients and traditional healers' conception of cancer, its cause(s), treatment effectiveness, as well as their stance on collaboration between traditional healers and western biomedical practitioners.

Traditional healers and cancer patients' conception of cancer and its causes

The values, beliefs and customs influence how cancer is being perceived by traditional healers. While some cancer patients perceived it differently. Both do not have an appreciable knowledge about cancer and could not appropriately define it within biomedical context but they both conceived it as a dangerous ailment. A cancer patient has this to say:

I just don't really can say what the disease is, it is so rampant nowadays, hardly can you eight out of ten people that will not have it. All what I know is that it is very dangerous and kills slowly.

Another cancer patient has this to say:

Cancer is a deadly disease, at times one might not aware of its symptoms because it manifests in diverse forms similar to other ailments. The fear of cancer on victims devours ones bodily virtues and psychologically disturbing.

The traditional healers also see cancer as dangerous and life threatening and hold the belief that, in most cases defers bio-medical solution. They conceive cancer into two- that is, "normal" (natural) and "abnormal" (supernatural), and this categorisation informed by their holistic conception of health and illness, based on their cultural milieu.

Cancer to me is very dangerous and most times you will not know that you have it. It will start eating you gradually. That is why is being referred to as *jejere* (devouring ailment). At times they are not ordinary, as it have spiritual undertone..

When asked what the causes of cancer is, it was revealed that respondents attach the cause to many things. Traditional healer attach it more to supernatural causation while cancer patients' more to natural causation. One of the breast cancer patients said "cancer is caused by infection with germs and poor personal hygiene" and another said "cancer is caused by viruses and body impurities". While the only male throat cancer patient has this to say:

In my mind I also think environment and lifestyle can cause cancer. Cancer is a parasite which can enter the body through the air we breathe in, what we eat and later result into multiplication of cells that refuse to die. Hence result in cancer.

The traditional healers attached cancer more to spiritual causation except one that said "I wouldn't know the cause because I am not a medical practitioner". Most of traditional healers said cancer could be caused by "spiritual attack". One of them in describing what cancer is said "cancer is mysterious spirit of infirmity that indwells victims through bewitchment". Another traditional healer who sees cancer in different perspective has this to say "It is spiritually wired especially when ancestors allow misfortunes such as cancer to inflict victim when registering their disgruntlement". Another traditional healer has this to say, "witches are taking advantage of the virus, take innocent people's life, and use cancer as a scapegoat. While some of the cancer patients who believe in bio-medical causation, but did not dispute that the disease can still be linked to supernatural causation clarified:

Most of the food eaten in the dream has spiritual undertone which often result into sickness and which cancer is not exempted". We can infer from the statement that an element

of local belief still reflect in the life of some cancer patients in the study areas.

Treatment modalities of traditional healers.

Traditional healers deal with the complete person and provide treatment for physical, psychological, spiritual and social symptoms. Traditional healers do not separate the natural from the spiritual, or the physical from the supernatural. This causes them to address cancer issues from two major perspectives – spiritual and physical. Traditional healers use a mix of herbs which include plant roots and spiritual incantations, preparations for skin application, most often divination and sacrifice. The treatment modalities among traditional healers vary based on their style of training and the kind of cancer. A local herbalist explained how he treats breast cancer with concoctions:

I prepare local concoction made up of extract from herbs, plants roots and mix it with cow dung and human urine which has to be paste and rub on affected parts, which is meant to neutralize and cleanses affected parts of the infected body.

A healer which adopts version that is different from the above explained:

I will make an incision in the affected area and rub it with non edible concoction. Then I'll recite some incantations. I'll point towards the breast and then touch with my finger. The anointing in my hand will pass through incision and get solution.

Another healer who incorporates intergrated approach in the treatment of cancer explained:

I adopt different style of treatment depends on the kind of cancer. How I can treat breast cancer will be different from prostate cancer. Generally, I treat using acupuncture, sacrificial prayer, and eating some special herbs for cancer. I also use magical power to pull out the disease.

A healer that is *babalawo* also explains his version of cancer treatment has this to say,

When patient come for treatment, I transfer the disease to a fowl. I recite incantations and place the fowl at the affected area. I instruct the disease into the fowl. The patient then kills and buries the fowl. All the symptoms disappear gradually

Treatment effectiveness between traditional and western biomedical practitioners

The perceived treatment effectiveness between traditional healers and western biomedical practices were based on individual experience with the two practitioners. With regards to cancer patients perception on effectiveness of traditional treatment

compared to biomedical treatment, majority (9 of 16) of the cancer patients however said traditional treatment was more effective while 3 of the patients were undecided. While two patients disagree on effectiveness of traditional practice and show their preference for western biomedical treatment. Patients stand on effectiveness was revealed through sharing the outcome of their treatment by traditional practice. Some patients reported relief from pain after seeing traditional healers. One of cancer patients reported that after consuming concoction prepared for him by the healer, “I feel the pain go away a little bit. The pain gets less. Another patient found that the herbal remedy helped with her breast tumor: “I see there is a difference. The tumor becomes softer, has shrunk, cold, and this thing, you know, sometimes it’s hot, so it becomes a bit cooler. I could sleep comfortably, not like before”. One of the patients who has a contrary opinion about efficacy and effectiveness of traditional healing practices said “I’m still insisting that in terms of cancer I doubt if there is anything a native doctor can offer”. He went further and shared “I was initially adopting traditional remedies, when there is no improvement my people took me to this teaching hospital” The patients seem to hold the opinion that orthodox treatment is more effective than a traditional treatment if one yield to the procedures in a proper way”. This is indirect way of saying western treatment is more effective. Three of the patients that were undecided are of the opinion that the two are at the same par. While they argue that for cancer to be effectively cured, the traditional and western treatment must be combined. Most of patients in the last group believe that local remedies must be taken first. As emphasized by one of them, “you engage appeasement ritual and fasting/prayer to cleanse the residue of virus before you take the biomedical drugs. Information gathered also revealed that some victims at times engage biomedical first, and later opt for traditional treatment when there is no improvement

Role of traditional healers and stance for collaboration

Both cancer patients and western medical practitioners have highlighted the role that traditional healers play in cancer treatment. It was gathered that traditional healers play an emotional, spiritual and palliative roles which are almost deficient among biomedical practitioners. Lack of knowledge about the disease leads to taboos, myths and fears that results in high levels of anxiety. Breast cancer patients in particular experience great anxiety in diverse forms. Traditional healers appear to alleviate some of this anxiety. A cancer patient whose assertion buttresses this said:

I recall the babalawo I consulted recently told me that my cancer could be cured, and I was very relieved at that time. He said I shouldn’t worry that everything will be cured whether I come to him or the doctor that my case is still in a good stage. He gave me a positive spirit.

A biomedical practitioner also buttressed the emotional role of traditional healer and opt for collaboration between traditional healers and orthodox medicine physicians

I acknowledge that traditional healers could play a psychological role in cancer treatment. We now realize the prevalence of depression, anxiety and all

neurotic problems among the cancer patients surprisingly is very high” and that “50 to 60% of patients suffering this kind of neurosis” need attention. This is a role that traditional healers can play and i do not object to them being part of “our team.”

Based on spiritual role play by traditional healers, the cancer patients and orthodox practioners.see the need for collaboration between traditional healers and orthodox medicine physicians. There’s a psychological component that can be treated by spiritual only. The spiritual part can treat the psychological which explained to him why many cancer patients go to healers.

Not all these cancer cases are biological as many of them has spiritual undertone. This explains why many cancer cases defy biomedical treatment. You can only treat spiritual case with spirituality.This is the area where most tradition healers are relevant in healthcare.

A western biomedical practioner has this to say:

Traditional healers have something to offer cancer patients in terms of spiritual healing. Unlike the physical healing side of their practice, western biomedical practioner seemed quite receptive to healers treating cancer patients in their role of spiritual guide.

While the medical doctors in our study had issues with their cancer patients seeing traditional healers while under their care, they saw some value in traditional healers having a role in palliative care. They provide client-centered, personalized health care that is culturally appropriate, holistic and tailored to meet the needs and expectations of the patient,” The palliative care role of traditional healer also necessitate the need for collaboration between traditional healers and orthodox medicine physicians.

Traditional healers have all it takes to render palliative care compared to orthodox practioner. They provide client-centered, personalized health care that is culturally appropriate. They can even sponsor patient and payback instalmentally.I have no issue with palliative care patients visiting a traditional healer: When nothing else can be done, when western medicine has nothing else to offer at this very late stage, we have no problem with patients seeking a traditional healer.

The issue of palliative care makes orthodox healers recommend referral most times either at the patient request or at their own discretion. One of the orthodox healers has this to say:

If the patients refuse surgery and ask if there is no any other method either they are too frail, too old or too scared for the surgery, but I will come to follow up. If the patients reject everything, but come to see me, then I recommend.

Another has this to say:

I refer patients to traditional healers when I have exhausted treatment .I recommend patients where I cannot provide any treatment like severe pancreatic cancer, and when they (patients) ask us if there is any other hope.

Discussion

From interviews with traditional healers, cancer survivors, and medical specialists, we uncovered that most of the patients and traditional healers in the current study did not really know what cancer is within biomedical context. Three patients could relate cancer with abnormal cell growth, while none of the traditional healers can actually define cancer in real biomedical context. Traditioner healers translate their understanding of disease based on their values, to view cancer. This is in line with assertion of Kuteyi (2017) and Asante (2013), that elements of ideal culture, such as the formation of ideas, views and beliefs about health and disease play a prominent role in shaping human health. Our findings corroborated the assertion of other studies (Adebola et al 2013; Fatusi 2019) that the cause of a disease may be linked to many source, as cancer is caused by a plethora of different factors ranging from poor lifestyle, spiritual attacks and host of others. The local perceptions of cancer as a dangerous disease generate a fear on the mind of victims and devise means to get over it. Most patients in this study have used either herbal or spiritual remedies for their cancer before going to the hospital. Some of them only go to the hospital because the traditional treatment was not as effective as they had hoped or because the healer advised it. This finding is in line with assertion of Bamidele (2009) that in instances of illness people initial adopt local remedies; but at times they do not hesitate to try out different remedies until, they stumble on the one that really works for them.

There was a mixed opinion as to the efficacy of alternative treatment for cancer amongst the patients in this study. While majority of the patients believe traditional healers who use herbs can cure cancer a few doubt their ability to do so. Patients reported high levels of satisfaction with traditional healers despite strong views on the ineffectiveness of these very practices. It may be that traditional therapy (in particular) tends to play a more pivotal role in the patient's emotional and spiritual well-being than potentially curative options (Mumo 2012). Patients and biomedical practioners in our study certainly emphasized the emotional and spiritual benefits derived from traditional healers. Patients reported that their faith was affirmed,

anxiety was lessened, and psychological distress reduced, even while recognizing that they would still need to be treated by Western biomedical practitioners for the cancer itself. This finding corroborates the assertion of Nelms and Gorksi (2006) that belief traditional healers' practices might delay in consulting western biomedical practitioners.

In the light of the burden of a cancer diagnosis and the danger in delaying the commencement of effective treatment, there is need to focus on how the dual traditional and western biomedical practitioners can work together in collaboration to optimize patient healthcare. The traditional healers and cancer patients in this study desire collaboration with the practitioners of the western biomedical practitioners. This finding corroborates the assertion of Tabi et al (2006) that most healers want to learn how to treat illness more effectively, so they are highly motivated to cooperate with the modern health sector. Also, data show a broad willingness to collaborate. Finally, promising grassroots initiatives have surfaces, and can guide the way forward. On the basis of the current study, we recommend identification of key healers and selection/support/promotion of the most promising grassroots initiatives. Also, there must be a pointed investment in power-sensitive relationships between healers and biomedical practitioners Government and NGO policies typically target healer-to-hospital referrals without paying enough attention to actual *dialogue* between traditional and western medical staff. However, face-to-face communication and interpersonal contact are key to successful and sustainable change in the social context of Nigeria. Crafting change, therefore, fundamentally depends on the systemic investment in boosting interpersonal contact between stakeholders. Rasaki (2019) has proposed a three-step process for achieving this collaboration. Firstly, he proposed that the government should formally recognize the traditional healers as having an important role to play in the health system. Secondly, traditional healers should be better organized in terms of forming a body to register and monitor the activities of their members. Finally, a sort of retreat could be organized in which traditional and western medical practitioners have opportunities to dialogue on their respective roles, expertise and limitations. This will enhance communication between the two practitioners.

Conclusion

This study is an effort to understand patients' perceptions and traditional healers' knowledge regarding cancer and its causes. Traditional healers carry much of the burden of health care in Nigeria, due to various roles in delivery system. Healers should be appreciated and recognized, socially, symbolically and materially, through basic aid and equipment Findings reveal that integration is hindered by: the biomedical health workers' lack of knowledge of traditional treatments, resulting for instance misunderstanding and discrimination. Yet, opportunities for collaboration do exist. Most important is the extensive infrastructure traditional care offers. A clear knowledge gap exists in traditional healers' conception of cancer. If they will ever be able to make appropriate referrals, then there will be a need to close this gap through health education that can be gained from a mutual relationship with western biomedical practitioners. These efforts should be accompanied by a communication strategy aimed at explaining and promoting collaboration and educating stakeholders. With these recommendations, directed at fostering interpersonal relationships, trust,

and mutual understanding, a sustainable system of collaboration can be developed whereby collaboration of traditional healers would result in an improved health care delivery system in general and cancer treatment in particular.

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