Title: Valuing African traditional health practices by medical students

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Context and setting: Many Africans grow up with experiences and treatments with traditional medicine (TM) and it is part of the African culture. Around 80% of Africans use TM for different health care needs. Consulting a traditional healer and a medical doctor for the same illness is common in many cultures. Over 60% of the population seeks health advice and treatment from traditional healers before visiting a medical doctor. In South Africa, medical practitioners and traditional healers work in two different environments (parallel health system). Although the two groups have their own philosophical, spiritual, social and psychological underpinnings, the role which the traditional healers play and the value of many African traditional medicines should not be ignored.

Why the idea was necessary: In the above context, it is important to enable medical students to understand the South African primary health care approach and the collaboration between modern and traditional healers/medicine. This exposure may enable them to increase belief and attitude on traditional healers' practices.

What was done: A longitudinal and interventional study was conducted at Walter Sisulu University for 98 first year medical students of 2010. A four-point Likert scale questionnaire with thirty items was administered at entry to evaluate the perception towards traditional healers and healing (pre-test). The structured and standardized questionnaire included socio-demographic data of participants and their families', villages' and friends' beliefs and attitudes about traditional medicines. They were exposed to four interventions, (1) gathering information from family on plants that are used to treat different illnesses; (2) collecting one medicinal plant and its information from their locality; (3) interacting with traditional healers on the role of traditional health care in the community; and (4) visiting the traditional healer's practice. At the end of the interventions, a post-test analysis was done to test whether the students have changed their perceptions (belief in TM), positive attitude towards TM, and practice (to recommend parents to use TM). The data was analyzed using SPSS for windows version 16.0 for univariate chi-square and logistic regression.

Evaluation of results/impact: The cohort contained 98 students (39% Males and 59% Females, 82% blacks, and age range from 16-23 years). At pre-test, 45% believed in TM, 51% had positive attitude, and 15.6% recommended parents to TM. After intervention, 46% believed in TM (0% of change; $P>0.05$)), 91% had positive attitude (+78% of change; $P<0.0001$)), and 38% recommended parents to TM (+43% of change; $P<0.05$)). Students' positive attitude ($P=0.015$), age<19years ($P=0.044$) and belief in TM ($P=0.0001$) were more significantly associated with TM practice. The independent determinants of belief in TM were always consulting TM (OR=14 95%CI 1.1-133; $P=0.040$), sometimes consulting TM (OR=70 95%CI 6.5-300; $P=0.0001$) and occasionally consulting TM (OR=4.7 95%CI 1.02-21.3; $P=0.047$).

The increased positive attitude of TM in these future practitioners of modern medicine will lead to more compassion and more empathy towards their patients who seek treatment from both types of practitioners. It may also provide opportunities for the exploration and utilization for biological activity of TM.

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