

Observations at Bowling Green-Warren Co. Health Department

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I observed at the Bowling Green-Warren County Health Department here in Bowling Green. In my observations, I talked to a health educator and a Cambodian translator who were in charge of helping Cambodian refugees when they came to the health department. I saw many nonacademic health traditions come into play. As I talked with the health educator and the Cambodian translator, they told me many nonacademic traditions used by the Cambodian people as well as some of the differences and comparisons between nonacademic and academic medicine used here in the United States and in Cambodia.

At first when I started talking to the health educator and translator, they were hesitant about telling me about the Cambodian people and their different beliefs. Although after a little general conversation, they began to talk to me.

The first thing they talked about pertaining to medicine was about a particular ointment or balm that they use. The ointment is called Tiger balm and the Cambodian people believe it will cure anything. They follow a particular procedure in applying this balm, in which they rub the Tiger balm on the place that hurts or is injured. Then they take a coin and rub where the balm was applied until their skin, at that place, turns red. For example, they believe if a person has a headache then in order to get rid of it you would rub this Tiger balm on the forehead and take a coin and rub the forehead until the skin there turns red. They believe that this will make the headache stop hurting. The ironic thing about this is that the Cambodian people consider this Tiger balm procedure as academic medicine? Where as here in the United States, we would consider the Tiger balm as a folk remedy or nonacademic medicine. The Cambodians put a lot of trust and faith in not only this Tiger Balm but a lot of "folk" beliefs and remedies as we will discuss.

Another thing that they believe is that if you have a stomach ache that they will burn your stomach. They believe that burning the afflicted area will cause the pain to cease or cure what ever you have.

One of the major things that the Cambodian people really believe in and put a lot of faith into is what they call a shaman or a magic man. This magic man deals mostly with mental illness, but he also deals with other sicknesses and diseases. The Cambodians believe that the magic man changes things or cures the person, not only because he is a magic man, but also because he chants a lot of words together and this is suppose to cure the person. In the United States, most of us, would never believe in a magic man, and we would probably laugh and think anybody was crazy who believe in a magic man. We would think even less of a person who claimed to be a magic man. But in Cambodia, every Cambodian person believes in this magic man and have so much faith in him that they believe that he can cure anything. This is the way these people were brought up, and they believe and have faith in this magic man. In fact, they will go to the magic man if they have any type of sickness, before they will go to their own doctor.

In talking about doctors, the Cambodian people do not like their doctors. They have more faith in the magic man and respect him more than their doctors. The Cambodian people distrust their doctors very much. In fact, that's why they go to the magic man to get cured because they distrust their doctors. This is very strange compared to the United States because most of us will go to the doctor if we are sick, and we would not even think of going to a magic man. This is the difference between cultures, because the Cambodian people do not believe that strongly in doctors. For example, if a Cambodian breaks his arm, they will not go to the doctor because they are afraid the doctor will cut it off. This is probably an old folk tale that has been handed down through the years. Actually, what may happen is that since they do not trust the doctors, then end up waiting to get their arm fixed and maybe gangrene sets up. They become deathly sick, and they finally end up going to the doctor to save their life. Often, he must cut their arm off. Whereas the magic man will chant a

few words and supposedly that will heal the arm.

The Cambodians have many folk tales that deal with diseases or injuries. One of those folk tales is that they believe all parts of the body have spirits. For example, they believe that the head is the most sacred, and the middle part of the body is second and so on. Therefore, you should not touch a Cambodian's head since it is the most sacred part of them, and also it has spirits in it. They believe that if you do touch their head then they will get a headache. Although, this may sound funny to Americans, the Cambodians believe it, and in fact, they will usually develop a headache because of that.

The Cambodian people believe also in ghosts and reincarnation. For example, they are afraid of rabbits because they believe rabbits can be ghosts. Also, they believe that when they die, they can be reincarnated into something else like a cow, rabbit, etc.

The Cambodian people also have different folk beliefs and academic beliefs. When it come to pregnancy, it differs from our folk beliefs and academic beliefs. For example, they believe after having a baby that you should not have sex for three months. In the United States, the doctors say you should wait about 6 to 8 weeks. You can compare this to academic medicine in the United States. Both the Cambodians and Americans believe that there should be a waiting period before you have sex. One reason for the waiting is because of infections. Although the Americans have a shorter waiting period, both the Cambodians and the Americans have similar beliefs. But the Cambodians also mix some non-academic beliefs in with the reason for waiting three months to have sex, and that is because they believe it is wrong to have sex before the three months are up. Therefore, there is connection to folk beliefs and academic medicine here.

The Cambodians, here in the United States, think very highly of the Americans.

They feel that the American doctors are very intelligent, and the Cambodian people regard knowledge of the medical people very highly. They feel that the Americans can cure anything that they have. Therefore, when they come over to the United States, they have this misconception that what ever they have can be cured by the doctor in the United States. But, some have found out different.

Although, the Cambodians have a great respect for the doctors over here compared to their own country, they are a little scared and skeptical of our ways because, as I have discussed, their ways are a lot different from ours. They believe a lot more in folk medical beliefs, like the magic men and spirits, than in the academic medicine. The reason being is because they do not trust their doctors, and they do not go to them, therefore, they must have some type of belief in order to supposedly cure their ailment. When the Cambodians become sick here, in the United States, they must go to the doctor because there is no magic man to take them to. They are not used to a doctor, and they are a little skeptical about thing the doctor does and medication given to them. But, as I said the Cambodians have faith in the American doctors, and they will comply to what the doctor recommends. They think some of our medical beliefs and practices are strange, but we also consider their medical beliefs and pratices strange also. It takes consideration and patients to work things out with each other.

In talking about what is at stake, there are many things that come into play here. The first thing is that the health educators, murses and health director, at the health department, must realize that these people have different beliefs and practices, and they must explain to the Cambodian people that what we are doing for them may be better, and therefore, they should at least try what the doctor recommends. If the people at the health department do not explain to them and have patience with these people, these people will rebel and become scared of American doctors, and these people will never comply to what

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our doctors recommend. Therefore, their faith and confidence is at stake, if they (Cambodian people) are not handled in an appropriate manner.

Another thing at stake is that the Cambodian people believe that if a member of their family or someone close to them develops a disease, then they will get that disease also. The doctor needs to explain to them not to be scared, and that they might not get the disease. He also needs to explain that there are preventive measure that can be taken in order for them not to develop certain diseases.

There are many similarities and differences between the Cambodian people and Americans. For example, things we consider to be folk remedies might be considered academic medicine to them. The health department really does a good job in trying to understand that. They do this with most foreign people who come into the department. If they do not do this, these people will be afraid of our medical practices and will not go to the doctor when they are sick.

The health department must also take into consideration that not only the foreign people have different medical beliefs, but also the rural people that come into the health department. Therefore, the health department must consider that all people are different, and that they have different beliefs. They do not always believe the same way that most people do.

I really learned a lot taking to the health educator and the Cambodian translator at the health department. Before, I assumed that if we considered a medical belief or practice as folk medicine, then so did everybody else. But, I found out that everyone is different and has different beliefs, and if health educator, especially doctors, keep this in mind, and take into consideration that everyone has different beliefs in diagnosing, curing and preventing diseases, then more people will be helped when they are sick.