

Folk medical beliefs and practices in Sitiawan

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Introduction

IN A developing country like Malaysia, where our cultural heritage is such that our people still cling on so steadfastly to the old ways and are still influenced by tradition in their thinking, behaviour, and action, it is inevitable that a practitioner in modern medicine will often encounter, and often find, certain beliefs and practices of our people interfering, hindering, and sometimes, perhaps, even resisting his practice of modern medicine. In such instances then, the modern medical practitioner's attitudes towards these folk medical beliefs and practices and how he reacts or deals with them will undoubtedly be of immense importance in his management of his patients. A knowledge and understanding of the traditional folk beliefs and practices, in relation to illnesses, their causations and cures, is therefore invaluable. This has been well recognised by the medical profession, and of late, more and more interest is being focussed on the topic. Sandosham (1974) called it the "cross cultural approach in medical practice", and Chen (1974) outlined what he called the "socio-cultural foundations" upon which medical practice in rural Malay communities might be based.

In this paper, the author presents a study of the people of Sitiawan in their beliefs and practices in respect of illnesses, their causations and cures. The purpose is to further enhance our knowledge and understanding of our people's traditional beliefs, practices, and behaviour in illnesses so that we can better deal with them, when we encounter them.

Materials and Methods

This study is based mainly on:-

- (1) Personal observations made by the author on his patients,
- (2) Random interviews of the general public, and
- (3) Personal knowledge of the author in folk medical beliefs and practices of the people of Sitiawan, being a member of the same cultural heritage, born and brought up in Sitiawan, subjected to the same influences and indoctrinations, and having shared the same beliefs, and experienced and participated in some of the practices himself.

Background

Sitiawan is one of five mukims of the District of Dindings, in the State of Perak. It comprises the following towns and kampongs:- Kampong Koh, Simpang Empat, Simpang Dua, Pekan Gurney, Simpang Lime, Kampong China, Kampong Pasir Panjang Luat, Kampong Datuk Sri Haji Kamaruddin, Kampong Sitiawan, Ayer Tawar, Kampong Raja Hitam, Kampong Bahru, Kampong Jering, and Kampong Selamat. Of these, Kampong Koh is the largest with a population of 8,071 (Census 1970). The main livelihood of the people of Sitiawan are rubber tapping, farming, and fishing. Sitiawan is, thus, by criteria and definition, rural, and enjoys the attention of the Government as a rural area in terms of development and medical and health facilities and services, although in many respects it has attained urban characteristics.

Medical and Health services in Sitiawan

There are eleven private modern medical practitioners manning twenty private clinics, viz:- Simpang Tiga 2, Kampong Koh 7, Simpang Empat

3, Ayer Tawar 5, and Changkat Kering 3. There is one District Hospital based in Lumut with 5 medical officers, and there are 2 Government sub-health centres (Pusat Kesihatan Kechil) with one in Simpang Empat and one in Ayer Tawar, and there are 7 midwifery clinics (kelinick2 bidan berkaitan) with one in each of the following towns and kampongs:- Kampong Koh, Kampong Sitiawan, Kampong Datuk Sri Haji Kamaruddin, Pekan Gurney, Kampong Raja Hitam, Kampong Ayer Tawar and Kampong Bahru. Besides these, there are Government mobile clinics which go into the remote rural areas at monthly or more frequent intervals. Thus, on the medical and health side, Sitiawan is quite well served by both the private sector and the Government.

The People of Sitiawan

There are three main ethnic groups living in Sitiawan, viz., Malays, Chinese and Indians. Of the total population of 55,972 in Sitiawan, 66.78% are Chinese, 13.36% Malays, 18.46% Indians, and 0.20% Others (Census 1970). Each of these ethnic groups tends to group into a separate community, with the Chinese concentrating mainly in the town areas, the Malays mainly along the coastal areas, and the Indians mainly in rubber estate or coconut plantation areas. However, despite this apparent ethnic segregation and grouping, with each ethnic community tending to retain their own culture and customary practices, brought along by their immigrant fore-parents, from the foreign land of their origin, there is a tendency towards cross-cultural interaction and influence, with the result that each ethnic group tend to adopt and absorb some of the beliefs and practices of the other ethnic groups. This is particularly observed in their beliefs and practices in folk medicine, where although there are a lot of differences, there are also basically a lot of similarities among the various ethnic groups.

The Yin and Yang Principle

Because of our heterogenous cultural heritage and the dominance of influence by the Chinese, and in order that we may or can attempt to understand our people's traditional beliefs, superstitions, and practices in illnesses, it is important that we know and understand the fundamentals of the Chinese concept of the Yin and Yang Principle upon which the whole system of the Chinese medical practice is based.

According to the Yin and Yang Principle, all energy (ch'i) and/or energy movement in the body originates from the conflict between a pair of opposites, called Yin and Yang. Yin is the female or the negative element, and Yang is the male or the positive element. In normal healthy condition, the

two opposing forces of the pair of opposites, the Yin and the Yang, are in a state of balance or equilibrium with one another, and maintain harmony or homeostasis in the body. However the two opposing forces are perpetually at tug-of-war with one another, with each trying and wanting to dominate the other. This engenders and determines the flow of the vital life energy, called ch'i, throughout the body. This energy (ch'i) is essentially vital for all bodily functions without which death will result, as when a person dies, the Chinese would say, "The ch'i has stopped or has left the body". If the orderly flow of energy (ch'i) is disturbed or interrupted at any site, the whole organism as well as the affected parts or organs becomes imbalanced and illness will result. The type of illness that will result will depend on which one of the pair of opposites dominates. An excess of energy in the Yin will give rise to a strong Yin which will therefore dominate over the relatively weaker Yang, and therefore the illness will manifest the Yin characteristics, and vice versa.

This disturbance in the relative strength of Yin and Yang causing imbalance and disharmony in the body can result from a number of influences and causal agents.

The traditional Chinese concept of wholeness of health is not just a maintenance of harmony in one's own body system, but a maintenance of harmony with the whole Universe and everything in it. Thus, man and the Universe are seen as two inseparable systems (Teoh 1973). Everything around him, including the 5 elements in the traditional Chinese concept (fire, water, wood, metal, and earth), the foods he eats, the environment he lives in, the weather, the position and movement of the stars and planets, etc, will influence and affect his Yin and Yang balance and hence his inner harmony, and hence his health.

Acupuncture

The fundamental of acupuncture is the use of needles to restore any imbalance of the Yin and Yang, which has been the cause of illness, and thereby restores health. According to the Yin and Yang concept, the energy (ch'i) flows along definite lines or routes, called meridians, throughout the body, in an orderly fashion. There are twelve paired and two unpaired meridians. Each of these meridians has its main branches and sub-branches like the roots of a tree, and they run throughout the whole body, reaching all the organs and tissues, carrying the energy (ch'i) to them, thereby regulating their functions and maintaining harmony throughout the body system. Illness will result when this orderly flow of ch'i is interrupted or gets out of balance. Acupuncture, by using needles to pierce certain

sensitive points in the skin, will restore the orderly flow of ch'i thereby restore the normal balance in the body. These sensitive points in the subcutaneous tissue of the skin are the acupuncture points. They lie along the meridians, and there are a thousand such points over the body surface. Each of these acupuncture points relates to an organ or a tissue in the body. The proper application of the needles to the points for the organ or tissue affected will restore normal function to that organ or tissue.

Moxibustion (Moxa treatment)

Moxibustion is the burning of herbs or moxa preparations, in the form of cones, balls, or sticks, on acupuncture areas. The theory is the same as acupuncture, and that is, by affecting the skin through the burning stimulation, the internal organs that are inter-connected to special skin areas (the acupuncture points) will respond, be stimulated, or be suppressed, and eventually be restored to normal.

Results

Now, having the background and an insight into the traditional Chinese medical concept, the author can now proceed to present the results of his study of the folk medical beliefs and practices of the people of Sitiawan.

A. Folk Concept of Aetiology of Illnesses

In the Sitiawan folk concept of illnesses, basically all illnesses are attributed to one or more of the following 5 known causal agents, viz., heat, cold, wind, water, and poisons, to which the 6th causal agent, the supernatural, may be added.

Diagnosis of an illness is made according to which of the above mentioned 6 causal agents is believed or thought to be the cause of the illness. Accordingly they are referred to as heat-caused illnesses, cold-caused illnesses, wind caused illnesses, water-caused illnesses, or poison-caused illnesses, and if illnesses are due to the supernatural, they are referred to as spirit possession, the work of witchcraft or magic, or the work of wrath of evil spirits, or ghosts, or gods, because the patient has offended them or has not fulfilled his promises made to them.

B. Folk Concept of Symptomatology and Signs of Illnesses

Such symptoms like dry mouth, thirst, sore-throat, epistaxis, yellowish expectorations, hemoptysis, red eyes, flushed face, constipation, malaena, dark concentrated urine, haematuria, insomnia, irritability, excitability, restlessness, headache, and pyrexia are said to be due to heat, whereas cold caused illnesses are said to manifest symptoms like rhinorrhoea, sneezing, chills, diarrhoea, watery dilute

urine, whitish expectorations, and cold extremities. Cough could either be due to heat or cold. When it is associated with yellowish expectorations or hemoptysis, it is said to be due to heat: when it is associated with whitish expectorations, like in asthma, it is said to be due to cold.

Wind caused illnesses are believed to present as abdominal pain, abdominal distension, fits, and various body and joint pains. The latter include all orthopaedic and rheumatologic diseases like osteoarthritis, ankylosing spondylitis, rheumatoid arthritis, fibrositis, myositis, neuritis, tendonitis, and gout. They are all referred to as "wind pain".

Relating to water caused illnesses, oedematous swelling of the face and legs are believed to be due to an excess of water, whereas symptoms and signs like deep breathing, panting, dry skin, and scanty urine are believed to be due to lack of water, which in turn is believed to be due to heat which dries up the water. Therefore, the symptoms of the two conditions are inter-related. Similarly are the symptoms of excess of water and "cold" inter-related.

Poisons on the other hand are believed to be the cause of infective inflammatory conditions like boils, erysipelas, impetigo, and skin eruptions and rashes of any kind, either allergic or infective. Itch is frequently complained of as a manifestation of 'poison in the blood'.

As with regard to the supernatural, hysteria (including mass hysteria) hallucination, violent outburst, delirium, flight of thoughts, withdrawn state, talking or singing to oneself, and in short, all the manifestations of psychiatric illnesses find easy explanation as being due to, and manifestation of, spirit possession, witchcraft, or the work of wrath of offended gods, ghosts or malign spirits. Congenital deformities and malformations are similarly believed to be of supernatural origin. It is believed that the embryonic development of a child can be influenced by the positions and movements of stars and planets and the imaginative and visionary impressions of the expectant mother. For examples, pre-auricular sinus, and thyro-glossal fistula or sinus are believed to be due to the expectant mother accidentally piercing her finger while doing sewing; hare-lip and cleft palate are believed to be due to the expectant mother accidentally cutting her finger while chopping wood or cutting meat, or according to the Malays, if bitten by a crab (Kuah 1972); birthmarks are believed to result from a mother doing painting while expecting; a mongol is born because the expectant mother has looked at monkeys too much and too often, or has eaten monkeys; similarly

watching movies is believed to affect the embryonic development of a conception, e.g. a swing of a sword in the movie in the direction of the embryo could sever a limb and the child could be born without a limb or limbs. Because of these, expectant mothers usually refrain, or are advised to refrain, from certain duties and entertainments.

C. Folk beliefs and practices in the treatment of Illnesses

Regarding treatment a great deal of attention is given to foods, which are usually classified into 4 types, viz., those that are 'cooling' or 'cold', those that are 'heaty' or 'hot', those that are 'poisonous', and those that are 'neutral'. There are no definite systems or criteria in the classification of foods. Some foods are classified more on individual experience and reaction to them than what they are generally accepted for they are. Thus, some foods may be considered by some people to be 'cooling', whereas to some other people they may be considered to be 'neutral'. For an example, duck is considered by some people to be 'poisonous' because when they take it their old illness is precipitated or aggravated. However, to some other people duck is completely harmless, and to them duck is 'neutral'. Yet, despite some of these incongruities and inconsistencies, there is general acceptance in the classification of most of the foods. The following Table 1 represents examples of the generally accepted classification of foods by the people of Sitiawan especially among the Chinese community.

It is learned that in the practice of folk medicine, the first principle is one of prevention and avoidance of the causal agents, and the second principle is to counter the actions of the causal agents and thus to restore health. For the first principle, the greatest

attention and emphasis is paid to foods. Avoidance of any suspecting or incriminating food is the rule, and as far as possible only the neutral foods are to be taken. This avoidance of foods is carried to the extreme by the rural Malays especially during the immediate puerperal period when only a plate of rice with salt and pepper is served. A second serving, fruits, vegetables and milk are tabooed (Kuah 1972).

The following are beliefs and practices of the people of Sitiawan in the treatment of the various illnesses.

(a) Heat Caused Illnesses.

These are believed to result from excessive ingestion of 'heaty' or 'hot' foods, or over exposure to heat, like being in the sun for long periods. Those who have an illness caused by heat are, therefore, recommended to avoid "heaty" or "hot" foods and to take "cooling" or "cold" foods. In addition they would be given "cooling" herbs to cool the body heat.

If fever is present, and especially when it is accompanied by nausea, vomiting and drowsiness, a condition known as 'ba'an' in Hock Chew, or "Chu Mo Dang" or just 'Mo Dang' in Cantonese, is diagnosed. This is a very popular diagnosis in Sitiawan, and it is believed that modern medicine cannot cure it, and it must be treated by traditional methods, at least initially.

Usually one or more of the following practices or methods is employed for treating 'heat' caused illnesses including 'ba'an' depending on the experience and choice of the practitioner:-

1. Washing or sponging with down-feathers from fowls soaked in warm water.

Table 1

Examples of Traditional Classification of Foods

Foods considered 'heaty' or 'hot'	Foods considered 'cooling' or 'cold'	Foods considered 'poisonous'	Foods considered 'neutral'
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. All fried or roasted foods especially eaten when still hot. 2. Meat from wild games e.g. wild boars, deer, monkeys. 3. Spicy foods like chillies, pepper, ginger, curry. 4. Coffee and cocoa. 5. Certain fruits like durians and rambutans. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ice and icy refrigerated foods. 2. Foods left overnight which have not been reheated. 3. Certain fruits and vegetables like water melon, sweet potatoes, cabbage, barley, cucumber. 4. Tea, glucose. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sea foods like crabs, prawns, ikan kembong, shark, Ray fish. 2. Meat from wild games durians, Jack fruit. 3. Chicken. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Rice. 2. Wheat flour and foods made from it like bread. 3. Pork. 4. Most fish like ikan bawal merah and ikan bawal puteh.

Rubbing the epigastrium with a warm boiled chicken egg wrapped in a piece of dark cloth. Sometimes a silver coin is introduced into the egg before commencement of the rubbing, and at the end of the treatment the coin is removed. If the coin becomes black, it is a convincing proof that the diagnosis is correct and that the causal agent has come out through the coin turning it black.

Needling. This is different from acupuncture. It usually consists of rubbing the epigastric region of the abdomen with some substances wrapped in a piece of black cloth. (The composition of the substances wrapped in the black cloth is a closely guarded secret and is handed down from parents to children. However, some believe that they contain caustic soda). After rubbing for some time, if the diagnosis of 'ba'an' is correct, weals or papules will appear over the area rubbed. This may be accompanied by the simultaneous appearance of coarse black hair-like objects resembling pig's hair, hence the Cantonese name for the disease 'Chu Mo Dang', for 'Chu Mo' in Cantonese means pig's hair. This hair-like objects can be pulled out one by one from the wrapped up cloth bundle used for rubbing. The weals or papules are then teased out with a needle, or they are pulled up with the tip of a needle and sliced open with a razor blade and then teased. Needling, cutting, and teasing will bring out whitish fine thread-like tissues. This is continued until all the weals or papules are done, when the treatment is complete, and the patient feels better with cessation of nausea and vomiting, and the fever subsides.

Snapping. Heat stroke, heat exhaustion, and heat-caused headaches are treated commonly by pinching and pulling the skin and the underlying tendon and muscle over certain designated sites of the body. The most common sites are the bridge of the nose, the neck, especially the sterno-mastoids, and the upper back involving the trapezius, the supraspinatus and the rhomboids. The proper procedure is to use the pulps of the thumb and index finger or the knuckles of the index and middle finger, and after wetting them with some water, pinch or grab the skin and tendon, or muscle, underneath it, pull, and then, let the tendon or muscle and skin slip off. If done with experience, there is a snapping sound as the muscle or tendon and skin slip off, and after repeating a few times, the skin so treated will turn red with echymoses. This proves that the diagnosis is right. If the illness is not due to heat the treated skin will

not turn red. After the treatment, the patient will usually feel better with the headache lessened or gone.

(b) Cold caused illnesses

These are believed to result from excessive ingestion of "cooling" or "cold" foods, or over exposure to chills or cold, like not wearing enough warm clothings in cold weather or getting caught in the rain. The remedies recommended are avoidance of "cold" or "cooling" foods and the taking of "heaty" or "hot" foods, besides herbal drugs. Quinine and paracetamol tablets are popularly self-prescribed and self-administered as a protective measure and for treatment of cold caused illnesses.

When one has been in the sun for long periods, or has been hot and sweating after strenuous work, then gets caught in the rain or takes a cold shower, or a bath, or a swim, and he becomes sick with fever and chills, he is said to suffer from "chee-chui" (which means "chilled with water"). It is believed that a patient with such a condition if given an injection will result in coagulation of his blood and he will die. Many fatalities in Sitiawan had been blamed on the failure of the doctor to recognise the condition and give the injection thus causing death. Folk treatment for this condition involves pricking the pulps of all ten fingers and toes as a form of bleeding or blood letting. In "chee-chui" it is believed that the blood will be dark and will ooze from the needle prick wounds. Sometimes folk practice in the treatment also involves rubbing and massaging the patient all over with oil. Only after all these treatments is a patient felt safe to be treated by a western trained doctor. In fact, some native practitioners will advise their patients to go for an injection by a modern doctor after they have treated them.

(c) Wind caused illnesses

These are believed to result from entry of wind into the body. Certain conditions are believed to predispose to wind entry:-

1. During the immediate post-partum period or puerperium. The mother is not allowed to bathe or go out-door during the confinement period to avoid wind from entering her and causing her to be ill. Puerperal fever is believed to be caused by wind entering the body through the still raw genital tract.
2. Sleeping without covering the abdomen especially the umbilical region. It is believed that wind can enter the body through the navel. If the navel is not covered during sleep, wind will enter the body through it and will cause abdominal pain.

3. Crying excessively. It is believed that the excessive opening of the mouth during crying will allow wind to enter through the mouth and thus cause abdominal distension and colic.
4. Sleeping in damp places or on cement floor. This is believed to give rise to rheumatologic and orthopaedic conditions called 'wind pain'.

Folk practices in the treatment of wind caused illnesses include:-

1. Rubbing and/or massaging the affected part or the whole body with a medicated oil called 'hon-yu', which is usually liniment methyl-salicylate or seal oil.
2. Cupping. This is done by burning pieces of paper in a tumbler, which is then inverted and cupped over the part of the body to be treated. The burning pieces of paper exhausts the oxygen in the tumbler thus creating a partial vacuum which produces the suction which is believed to be able to extract the wind from the affected part of the body. The area so treated becomes bruised circular patches, taking the shape of the mouth of the tumbler. These could last for days. The most common sites for cupping are the lumbar region of the back for low backache, the upper part of the back, the chest, and the epigastrium for generalised body aches or myalgia, and the umbilical region of the abdomen for wind caused abdominal pain.
3. Leeching. This is done with a hollowed buffalo's horn which is open at both ends. The skin over the area to be treated is shaved (if it is hairy) and then cut several times superficially with a razor blade so that bleeding occurs. The wider end of the horn is then placed over the bleeding skin and suction is done by applying the mouth to the narrower end of the horn. A modification of this is the use of a bamboo tube instead of the buffalo's horn. This leeching is also employed in removing causal agents of supernatural origin especially by the Malays.
4. Acupuncture.
5. Moxibustion.

These latter two, acupuncture and moxibustion, have been dealt with earlier. They are employed not only for the treatment of wind caused illnesses but also for all forms of illnesses where the restoration of the Yin and Yang imbalance is needed.

(d) *Poison caused illnesses*

Abscesses, boils, and all other infective inflammatory conditions like erysepelas, cellulitis and infected wounds, pruritus, and various skin eruptions and rashes, either of infective or allergic origin, are believed to be caused by 'Poison in the blood'. This may result from the ingestion of 'poisonous' foods, or entry of 'poison' through wounds and animal or insect bites. Foods that will precipitate or aggravate an inflammatory condition are said to be 'poisonous', and include prawns, crabs, ikan kembong, durians, chicken, etc. Therefore, in poison caused illnesses, avoidance of 'poisonous' foods is usually advised. In addition the following are usually practised:-

1. Purging with purgatives and laxatives to cleanse the body of 'poison', and to wash out the excessive heat in the body. In the folk beliefs poison and heat are closely related and both are considered to be usually present together.
2. Self-prescription and self treatment with anti-poison drugs. All antibiotics and sulphonamides are regarded as all-purpose anti-poison drugs, and they are used in almost any condition which is thought or believed to be caused by poison or likely to give rise to a poisonous condition. The most commonly used anti-poison drugs are tetracycline, penicillin, and M & B 693 (sulpyridine). Tetracycline capsules are commonly taken for dog's bite, nail prick, and any other physical injuries. Usually only one or two capsules are taken and the patient feels falsely safe and secured that he is protected. Penicillin ointment is commonly used for sores, cuts, mosquitoes' bites, skin rashes of any sort, itch and burns. M & B 693 tablets are popularly and almost customarily ground into powder and used to dress wounds, ulcers, eczema, otitis media and otitis externa. Itch is generally considered to be a manifestation of poison in the blood, and the anti-poison drugs are often self-prescribed and self-administered for its treatment. Even the traditional medical practitioners are adding these Western drugs to their range of cures.

(e) *Supernatural caused illnesses*

Malevolent demons, evil spirits, offended gods or ghosts, and evil magicians and bomohs (traditional Malay medicine men with magical powers) are believed to cause illnesses in the following ways:-

1. by taking possession of the victim's body and creating havoc therein.

2. by witchcraft in the projecting of stones, darts, poisons, worms, etc., into the victim's body, or in extracting something, usually part of the victim's soul, from the victim's body.

For the treatment of these illnesses, celestial beings are generally consulted to find out the cause and to obtain advice with regard to cures. Usually either a spirit medium (dang-ki), or a paster, or a bomoh, is called for the purpose, depending on which ethnic group, culture, and religion the patient and his family belong to. These people serve as a medium of contact with the celestial world and celestial beings, and through whom the celestial beings can talk to the mortal beings, assisting in diagnosis, and giving advice regarding cures.

Folk practices in the treatment of these illnesses involve and include prayers, incantations, the use of charms or charm papers (hoo), exorcisions, the wearing of talismans or amulets to protect against and to ward off evil spirits and evil spells, and the appeasement or atonement of offended gods or ghosts by the fulfillment of promises made to them, the making of offerings, and/or the performance of certain rites or rituals.

Discussion

The Sitiawan folk concept of the six causal agents (heat, cold, wind, water, poison and the supernatural) and particularly the first four (heat, cold, wind and water) undoubtedly has its origin in the ancient traditional Chinese concept of the five elements (fire, water, wood, metal and earth) with, of course, compromise, influence, alteration and modification by the Hindu concept of the four elements (fire, water, wind, and earth), and the concept that the human body like all matter in general is made up of these elements. According to the ancient beliefs, health in an individual depends on the balance in composition between these elements in the body. Any disturbance in any one of these elements will result in illness, the nature of which will depend on the element disturbed and whether it is increased or decreased. Through the passage of time, much of this concept of illness causation has become blended with and absorbed into the Yin and Yang concept.

However, although these ancient medical concepts are only philosophical and superstitious beliefs, they have become so ingrained into our people that a barrier is formed in their receptiveness against the knowledge and understanding of the modern scientific concept of illnesses. To these people illnesses are still attributed to the traditionally conceived six causal agents, with their symptomatology and signs explained by them, and their therapy based on them.

Stomach ache caused by eating food left overnight is still held to be due to the 'coldness' of the food and not due to food poisoning due, to the presence of bacteria and toxins. Psychiatric illnesses, especially schizophrenia, paranoia, and various psychoses, are still believed to be due to spirit possession and witchcraft, caused by demons, or offended gods, or ghosts, or evil bomohs. The fatalities of 'chee-chui', which are actually cases of G-6-P-D deficiency, with intravascular haemolysis precipitated by certain drugs leading to acute renal failure and eventually death if prompt and proper treatment is not instituted, are still believed to be due to coagulation of the blood as a result of injections for the condition.

Yet, however, despite the wrong concept, the wrong reasoning, and the wrong explanation, some of the practices adopted by the rural people in their prevention and treatment of illnesses are not wrong or harmful. Indeed, some are beneficial, and some we may even learn and make use of in our practice of modern medicine. Examples of these are:-

1. The customary practice of heating up food left overnight to drive out the 'coldness' so as to prevent stomach ache is in actual fact killing and destroying the bacteria and toxins present, thus preventing food poisoning.
2. The washing and sponging of a febrile patient with chicken feathers soaked in warm water to bring down the temperature is comparable to tepid sponging of our modern scientific medical practice. Similarly is the rubbing of the epigastrium with a warm boiled chicken egg wrapped in a piece of dark cloth, although the dark cloth and the silver coin turning black are mere magician's tricks designed to make the show more convincing. The silver coin turns black because of the formation of a covering of silver sulphide in reaction with the sulphur present in the egg yolk.
3. The principle and methods involved in the treatment of psychiatric illnesses are not unlike those employed in psychotherapy in modern psychiatry, except, perhaps, that the approach is different, and that psychiatric illnesses are not considered as disturbances of the mind but as being due to supernatural causes. However, there are many features in the traditional beliefs and practices in the treatment of the mentally sick that merit our attention and which perhaps we can learn and incorporate into our modern psychotherapeutic principle and procedures. One fact worthy of note is the use by the traditional healers of the knowledge of religion,

mythologies, folk beliefs, folk superstitions, and the ancient medical concepts and practices, and correspondingly, the use of such knowledge and cultural resources by the mentally sick in their psychiatric expressions and manifestations. Another important fact to note is the avoidance of any mention of mental illness in diagnosis by the traditional healers. Any reference or inference to a psychiatric illness is not only most unwelcome but may be fiercely rejected. The attribution to spirit possession, witchcraft, and the work of the wrath of offended gods or ghosts is culturally sanctioned and is more acceptable.

In addition, we must also realize the important role played by the traditional healers in our nation's mental health care – an area where our modern Western-Style psychiatric care is not only limited in facilities and availability, but also much hampered by the language and cultural barrier to effect meaningful or successful psychotherapeutic procedures except drugs and electro-convulsive therapy. Teoh (1973) acknowledged that the traditional healers not only shoulder the brunt of the mental health care in our country but also supplement our modern western-style psychiatric care. In this regard, therefore, and for the time being at least, the traditional and the modern, must go hand-in-hand to provide the best for our mentally sick.

4. The customary practice of the expectant mother refraining herself, or advised to refrain herself, from certain strenuous duties, like moving house or furniture, and certain exciting entertainments, like watching horror movies, though for superstitious reasons, is beneficial, for it affords both mother and baby with a period of rest which is needed. This together with the Chinese customary practice for the mother to rest for the whole confinement moon-month, with the special high protein diet of chickens, ginger, and rice wine, is certainly to be encouraged.
5. The stress of folk medical practice on food and avoidance of certain foods during an illness can be used to advantage in our modern scientific medical treatment of certain illnesses in that one can be quite certain the instructions will be followed. Examples are:-
 - (a) Low salt diet in congestive cardiac failure, nephrotic syndrome, and certain cases of hypertension.
 - (b) Low cholesterol and low animal fat diet in hypertension, coronary heart disease and conditions of hypercholesterolaemia.

- (c) Low protein diet in renal and hepatic failure.
- (d) Avoidance of precipitating foods like crabs, prawns etc. in asthma and other allergic conditions; and sometimes in infective inflammatory conditions, the practice of modern medicine can be so much more acceptable, and the patient so much more satisfied, if advice on avoidance of "poisonous" foods is given.

6. Certain terminology like "wind pain" can be very handy when coming to the conveyance or explanation of illnesses to the patient. Especially for rheumatologic and orthopaedic conditions like rheumatoid arthritis, osteoarthritis and gout, etc., it is almost impossible to explain them in any other terms.

Examples of folk beliefs and practices which are harmful and dangerous and which we should help to discourage and abandon are:-

- (1) The employment of oil to rub and massage children with fever or convulsions, and then covering them up with thick clothings, as a way of getting rid of the causal agent, wind, and preventing it from re-entering the body again, is definitely harmful and dangerous. The oil forms an insulating layer over the body which prevents any escape of heat and sweat. This is aggravated by the thick clothings and will cause the already high temperature to rise further. This will either precipitate a febrile convulsion or aggravate the existing convulsion. The author had seen several children who had died because of this treatment.
- (2) Needling employed in the treatment of 'ba'an' or 'Chu Mo Dang' is also harmful and dangerous because the needle used is usually not sterilized, and the chances of the practice giving rise to tetanus and other bacterial infection are high, and in many instances keloid formations are common sequelae. Leeching shares these dangers and harms.
- (3) Acupuncture, although has gained recognition as effective in producing analgesia for surgery and in the treatment of certain illnesses, is to be discouraged in its use by untrained and non-experienced people. As it is, anyone, who possesses a set of acupuncture needles, can practise acupuncture. The risks of infection and injury to nerves are always present. In the opinion of the author there should be some form of legislation to govern its practice.

- (4) The abuse of western drugs in self prescription and self medication by the lay public, the inclusion of their use as an added form of cures by the traditional medical practitioners, and the easy availability and accessibility of drugs to the public are fast becoming public health problems. Because of the wrong information on the pharmacology of the drugs and non-education in their use, the dangers of side effects (sometimes very dangerous) are not considered. Antibiotics and sulpha drugs are not usually taken as a course, and usually for the wrong reason. The indiscriminate, uncontrolled, and unsupervised use of steroids have ended in many fatalities. The development of resistant strains of bacteria and hypersensitivity reactions are other dangers. Indeed, this is an area of folk medical practice which we in the medical profession must understand and deal with.
- (5) In addition the common folk practice of taking drugs and herbal tonics (like Beh-Din-Chao cooked with chicken) during pregnancy can cause congenital deformities and malformations and expectant mothers should be properly advised.
- (6) The avoidance of foods to the extreme, like during puerperium in the Malay custom, is not a healthy practice. Mothers who are already under-nourished become so much so that they become inflicted with serious syndromes of avitaminosis, including nutritional neuropathy and paralysis.

However, besides the beneficial side and the harmful side of folk medical practice there are some beliefs and practices which are neither harmful or beneficial. Yet, because they are so ingrained in the custom and tradition of our people that any attempt to discredit them or to break them down will be met with open rebuff and antagonism. It is best to leave these as they are. Examples of these practices are:-

1. The practice of classifying foods into the 4 types "heaty" or "hot", "cooling" or 'cold', 'poisonous', and 'neutral' – and their avoidance and use in the treatment of illnesses.
2. Cupping and Snapping.
3. Various religious rites and rituals and the use of talismans, amulets and charms papers or 'hoo'.

Conclusion

Folk medical beliefs and practices in Sitiawan are very primitive. Indeed some can be traced back to as early as the Stone Age. However, the fact that they persist to this day and are still popular with our people, despite the adequate modern medical and health facilities and services, must mean that they must still serve their purpose and usefulness. In this study the author reveals that although the

concept of illness causation and the reasoning for the various treatments are wrong, some of their practices employed in therapy to get their desired results are not so different from our modern medical practices. In fact because of the cultural barrier that impedes the delivery of Modern Medical care to the people, something learned from the folk medical beliefs and practices may help us penetrate the barrier and gain acceptability for the modern scientific medicine, which will no doubt help and benefit our people more than the folk medicine can. There has, as a result, recently, grown an awareness of the need for all medical practitioners, and particularly those involved in primary medical care, to be equipped with a sound knowledge and understanding of the folk medical beliefs and practices.

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