

Knowledge of Kaposi Sarcoma (KS) and HIV among Traditional Healers in Zimbabwe

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BACKGROUND

Traditional healers play a major role in providing health care in Africa and many HIV-infected people seek care from traditional healers while simultaneously receiving Western-style medical care. This pluralistic practice can result in treatment delays, late diagnosis and higher mortality rates for HIV-related conditions, including Kaposi sarcoma (KS). This study aimed to evaluate traditional healer knowledge of HIV and KS and the perceptions of people with KS who have sought care from traditional healers.

METHODS

Between September 2015 and February 2016, traditional healers were invited to attend one of 11 informational sessions conducted by KS medical experts at 8 clinics in Zimbabwe. Healers were asked to complete a survey about their knowledge and experience in treatment of KS and HIV. KS clients were asked to complete a survey about their perceptions towards traditional healers. Qualitative results were organized into themes and analyzed.

RESULTS

Data were obtained from 406 traditional (30%), faith (32%) and herbalist (38%) healers. Faith and herbal healers were more likely to be older and more educated than traditional healers (both p<0.0001). Among healers, 76% claimed familiarity with KS and had treated clients with the disease. Over half (55%) of healers had positive opinions toward medical treatment only for KS and HIV, and 20% of healers recommended that both traditional and medical practitioners work together in treating the disease. Healers were more knowledgeable of the accepted medical treatment for HIV but had limited knowledge of treatment options for KS. Healers would more often recommend traditional medicines; such as herbs, supplements, dietary concoctions or spiritual guidance, for treating KS than for HIV. Surveys from 395 KS clients were obtained, with 115 (29%) having visited a healer before. Those who had visited a healer were more likely to be rural rather than urban dwellers (OR 1.6; p=0.05) and 82% visited a healer specifically for KS consultation; 17% were 'somewhat', 'very' or 'definitely' satisfied with the care received from a healer whereas 94% had the same satisfaction with the care received at the medical clinic.

Traditional healer's treatment recommendations for KS (n=406)	
Recommend going to hospital/medical doctor	241 (59.4%)
Recommend treatment with traditional medicines	188 (46.3%)
Traditional Healer's treatment recommendations for HIV/AIDS (n=406)	
Recommend hospital/medical doctor for testing, examination and/or treatment (including ARVs)	
Recommend HIV treatment with traditional medicines	113 (27.8%)
Client satisfaction with care/treatment received from a traditional healer (n=115) Client satisfaction	
'Somewhat', 'very' or 'definite' satisfaction	20 (17.4%)
Client satisfaction with care/treatment received from a clinic (n=115)	
'Somewhat', 'very' or 'definite' satisfaction	113 (93.8%)

What the Traditional Healers say…

Recommendations for HIV Treatment:

"I encourage them to use honey and lemons and prayers. I do not forget to tell them to go to the hospital"

"We encourage using tablets for HIV such as ARVs"

"I first need a medical doctor's report eg blood test and CD4 count. That will ascertain the herbs one requires to boost their immune and opportunist infections to the patient"

Recommendations for HIV Treatment:

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What the Traditional Healers say about working together…

"I encourage the hospital and traditional medicines to work together"

"By uniting with traditional healers and the hospital, we can cure KS. It can be cured completely"

"If we unite faith, traditional healers and those from the hospital, its possible to help patients even curing all types of these diseases"

"I think that perhaps we work together, the traditional practitioners and doctors"

"If we unite, the hospital and traditional practitioners, its possible to treat and cure"

CONCLUSIONS

Traditional healers are often the first care provider for many seeking KS treatment and a collaborative approach toward care should be considered. Even though knowledge of medical treatment of HIV has increased, better understanding of KS disease by traditional healers could help with earlier diagnosis and linkage to medical care.

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