Role of Traditional Birth Attendants in Family Planning
Proceedings of an international seminar held in Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur, 19-26 July 1974

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Editors: J. Y. Peng, Srisomang Keovichit, and
Reginald MacIntyre

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Traditional Birth Attendants in Malaysia

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There are an estimated 3000 traditional birth attendants (kampong bidans) in Malaysia. The Ministry of Health started to register these TBAs a few years ago and by the deadline date some 1888 had officially registered.

In January 1969 the National Family Planning Board and the Ministry of Health of Malaysia started to train these TBAs for 3 weeks including 1 week for maternity care, 1 week for family planning, and 1 week for actual experience with local health authorities. UNICEF assisted the training project and one of the UNICEF delivery kits was given to each TBA who completed the training. No systematic plan was adopted to utilize the TBAs in health or family planning. They were requested to record the delivery cases and report to the local health authorities, bringing the midwifery kit to be examined by the nurse/supervisor, and to get a supply of consumable items.

Some effort has been made to compile information about TBAs in Malaysia, such as: the actual number, their background characteristics, the customs they follow related to childbirth, the proportion of deliveries being attended by the TBAs, how are they trained to practice, how much do they charge for attending each delivery, what is their attitude toward family planning, can they be utilized in health and family planning programs, etc.

Childbirth Customs

Professor Paul Chen (1973) of the University of Malaya has done some research on the customs related to childbirth in rural Malay culture. He summarized the customs related to childbirth as practiced by rural Malays into four categories: The beneficial, such as prolonged breast-feeding, restrictions on the activities and movements of mother and baby, and a local postpartum massage, should be actively encouraged or adopted. The harmless, including measures devised against evil spirits, are best ignored. The harmful, such as dietary taboos, will require modification by friendly persuasion and health education. Those of uncertain effect, including the customary “roasting” of the mother, need to be further investigated.

Survey of TBAs

Information relating to other questions was obtained through interview of the TBAs at the time they came for 3 weeks' training. The interviews were conducted between January 1969 and December 1970 and the
results were published in “Studies in Family Planning” in February 1972 (Peng et al.). Although the interview sample was 292 and not scientifically selected, and hence not representing the universe, the results were quite useful for general information. The mean age of the TBA was 47, ranging from 20 to 71. About 84% of them were over 40. About 73% were currently married, 18% widowed, 8% divorced or separated, and 1% never married.

Eighty percent had no schooling and 18% had only 1–5 years education. Forty-three percent had practiced less than 10 years, 32% between 10 and 20 years, and 25% more than 20 years.

When asked who taught them to deliver babies, 27% said their grandmother, 22% their mother, 8% their aunt, 5% their friend, 2% mother-in-law, and 6% combination of people mentioned above, and 30% other sources.

On average, each TBA reported attending three deliveries during the past month and 26 deliveries during the past year. TBAs with more years of practice had the higher average number of deliveries attended.

The average charge reported by them was 5.4 Malaysian dollars (about US $2) per delivery. Thirty-six percent said they did not receive gifts other than cash but the other 64% said they received clothes, chickens, and other items.

Fifty percent said that they performed massage combined with other services, and 12% said they did not do anything other than midwifery tasks.

Almost 100% of the TBAs approved of providing married women with family planning services. Ninety-nine percent said that they were not worried that the government’s family planning services would affect their job in conducting deliveries. Ninety-five percent thought that they could help to promote the government’s family planning program by recruiting acceptors and distributing contraceptives.

According to a report by the Maternal and Child Health Committee of the National Health Council, about 174,000 births or 57% of all deliveries in 1964 were under medical supervision (through government hospitals, health centres, non-government nursing homes, and clinics at rubber estates and tin mines). The remaining 43% of all deliveries were attended by private midwives almost all of whom were TBAs. According to the West Malaysian Family Survey conducted in 1966–67, 39% of rural and 31% of all respondents’ last live births were attended by TBAs.

**Future Role of TBAs**

There are still some more important questions to be answered. Is there a place and value in utilizing these traditional birth attendants in family planning or in health services? If so, how long can the TBA be of use considering the development of health manpower and facilities in the country, and how do we secure financial resources to maintain the program?

In Malaysia we organized the TBAs to utilize them in the national family planning program. We think we have done a good job in this field in Malaysia with a well-organized system of operation and close supervision.

**References**


