Traditional Health Systems and Public Policy

Proceedings of an International Workshop, Ottawa, Canada, 2–4 March 1994

Edited by
Anwar Islam and
Rosina Wiltshire
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My first recollection of an encounter with a Filipino traditional medical practitioner was when I was just a child. I was 10 years old when I fell down the stairs without my family knowing it. However, after the accident, I became ill with fever and loss of appetite prompting my uncle to bring me to a lady healer. With a basin of water, candle and prayers, she uncovered my secret. As the melted candle dropped on the water, it formed a figure which she identified as me holding a pail in one hand and slipping down the stairs. Indeed, it was what happened. Confident about her diagnosis, she readily massaged me and the fever was gone. I was no longer ill. Amazed, I could only ask, "How was she able to do it? It's magic!"

For somebody like me who has been injected with the idea of becoming a doctor, little did I know that later this experience would actually spark up my transformation as a doctor and person who believes in and respects the healing art and science of traditional medicinal practitioners. Even before entering medical college, I had already associated myself with traditional medical practitioners from whom I learned a lot about healing and curing. They impressed on me that healing is not just a technique but a discipline, a way of life, a religion, a commitment. Nobody can just be a healer. He/She is a chosen one and is merely a channel of the more omnipotent power. Often, one becomes a healer after a severe sickness, after he/she has overcome physical limitations and is ready for a higher hands down the knowledge to one of his/her psychic faculties have opened up. At times, too, a healer hands down the knowledge to one of his/her children and gradually teaches him/her the discipline. The healer's strength comes from daily meditation and prayers. Whatever he/she does, be it therapeutic massage, eccentric diagnostic methods, herbal medicine, the ritual always starts with the calling of God's intercession. The healer indeed is a constant reminder of reverence to Almighty and to everything he has created.

I am reminded of a statement that says.

"The artist of the future is not going to paint pictures or dance, or sing, or write music or poetry primarily. He or she will be a wizard, a magician, a shaman who will use any and
all media to transform the consciousness of this planet."

Through time, traditional medicine has sustained itself through processes deeply rooted in a society's socio-cultural complexes. Indigenous medicine, certainly, is more than just magic. It is a set of concepts of health and illness that reflect certain values, traditions, and beliefs based on the people's way of life, or culture. Indigenous medicine is just but one of the manifestations of the people's would view, how they relate and interact with themselves as individuals, as part of the community, and the rest of the environment. Maybe, here lies the secret of its sustainability - its relevance to people's lives even as it only primarily responds to people's health problems. There is wisdom in indigenous medicine that may help in developing health systems that can be appropriate even at this time.

COMMED, the organization where I belong now, is positive about the contributory and important role Filipino traditional medicine in the development of a relevant health system for the Filipinos. This conclusion is rooted in our community experiences. The COMMED is a non-profit, not-stock, non-governmental organization that addresses itself by fielding physicians in the marginalized areas all over Philippines. This was established only in 1987 by 10 young doctors who decided to take part in the solution of the ill stricken Philippines health situation where communicable diseases remain the top killers of the Filipino society and where health remains accessible and unaffordable. In fact, 6 out 10 Filipinos die without ever receiving any form of medical attention. Whereas other doctors chose to stay in urban centres in the Philippines or abroad, COMMED physicians opted to stay in the rural areas and become a part of the process of community development.

Initially, COMMED had to answer only the shortage of human health resources in the community. However, community integration only made us realize that medical education did not prepare us to respond to community needs. There are several reasons for this.

First, health care has become totally dependent on high technology curative interventions which lowly ordinary people from Third World countries like the Philippines cannot afford. Doctors are trained to diagnose only by using machines such as X-rays, and laboratory examinations which are not available in remote areas.

Second, the health system propagates a culture which is drug dependent, doctor-oriented, and highly commercialized. Doctors are taught to write prescriptions to treat patients. However, it is also in the community that COMMED learned that the doctor's responsibility does not end at giving prescriptions. He/she organizer, teacher, and learner besides being a healer.
Third, this "modern" medicine remains unaccommodating to the traditional concepts of health and illness which the community has already internalized. Doctors are ill-equipped in understanding these concepts as they are totally marginalized in medical schools.

Deep analysis of these problems as community development workers led us to conclude that the model of medicine or health applied is irrelevant to the Philippines realities. The formal and legal health care system in the Philippines embraces that of North America. Originating from the "West", the "modern" western medicine mirrors the health perceptions and responses of a western industrialized society, not of a developing country like the Philippines. Biomedicine has ceased to become relevant yet it is the dominant model of medicine. It can actually account for only a small fraction in the whole spectrum of health. It is more of an ideology than a science. Adapting biomedicine is acquiring the value system which it reinforces consciously or unconsciously. Perpetuated is the medicalization of life events and encouragement of professional dominance. Even the reductionistic attitude towards people where people become mere objects of study is evident. It has lost its humanizing elements. More often than not, it is diseased-oriented. The psycho-social aspects of health are not given emphasis (Tan, 1990). In addition, with this model, health is uprooted from its socio-economic context. It is not any more surprising that some health problems repeatedly torment the Philippine society.

For a health care system to be relevant to the people it serves, it must be suited to economic and socio-cultural conditions of the nation. Likewise, it must also be fitted to the people's psyche or consciousness. Necessary, therefore, is a new conceptual framework that recognizes the interconnectedness of health with other aspect of the environment and that will lead to the development of a holistic approach and attitude towards health. It would be this new holistic concept that shall be the "blue print" to finding new meaning about health, about life, about Filipinos, about people.

Agenda 21, Chapter 6 states, "Health ultimately depends on the ability to manage successfully the interaction between physical, spiritual, biological, and economic/social environment... The health sector cannot meet basic needs and objectives on its own; it is dependent on social economic, and spiritual development while directly contributing to such development".

COMMED believes, therefore, that in order to develop a more relevant and appropriate health system that is responsive to the bio-psycho-socio-cultural uniqueness of Filipinos, there is a need to "tap and develop" the potential that is already existent in our culture - the indigenous medicine. There is a need to study traditional medicine as its richness in the realm of psycho-social and cultural spheres may help make our view of model for us to go
back to the civilization where it originated. We only have to study traditional medicine as openly, yet as critically, as possible and learn what ever is relevant to our times and to our people.

Currently, the Department of Health, with its new secretary is supportive of the "integration of TM into the health delivery system". This is translated as formal acceptance and utilization of herbal medicine, acupuncture, etc, in our health system. This is new but brings several issues of concern:

- what exactly is the meaning of "integration of traditional medicine and western medicine?"

- what the National Cancer Institute of USA has done, we have done several years ago. We are now producing tablets, syrups, ointments from our herbal medicine. This is excellent because we have substitutes of expensive drugs. But is this truly developing traditional medicine when the values inherent in it have been taken away? Reinforced is the "pill for every ill-culture". What about self-reliance of the community? In the process, the community will again be reduced to raw material gatherers or providers. And when the drug companies get the rights for manufacture, it will all end where it started - back to costly herbal medicine tablets.

Publishing books about our herbal medicine can be dangerous for our people as this may be a very good avenue for exploitation. research can be done by several groups. When they are proven, then they can have the money for themselves not for the people. But whose knowledge is this in the first place.

Several issues will rise up unless we are clear on what we are doing. Going back to indigenous medicine is getting back to wholeness. It is a celebration of being human again - where everybody and everything surrounding them - careful not to step on anything that may be harmful- be it to persons or to the elementals and spirits or to nature. Carved into the heart is the unwritten code of ethics respect. However, what we fear right now is that this time, this global consciousness towards indigenous knowledge systems will be taken advantage of buy the more dominant powers be it the First World or the biomedical model. This instead may be a venue of exploitation.

When we decide to get back to the indigenous, we also have to decide on the philosophy of why we are doing it, else nothing will guide us towards the direction or the goal. He who holds knowledge, holds power. He who holds the economy of the would can control the direction of the development of the indigenous systems. Then what
should be the role of the indigenous peoples in this undertaking? Without principles, philosophies guiding our path, we may only do injustice to indigenous systems and to the indigenous people.

Always, when people would like to take and understand is their knowledge and skills but not the attitude, the values, and spirituality that guided the richness of their knowledge and skills. Therefore, the stealing of intellectual property will always be a major concern because efforts may be guided by wrong values and then indigenous systems will be wrongly used - abused.

To be serious in adapting indigenous systems, it is necessary to first get into its essence. This is the challenge of getting into its core before even thinking of "using" it and manipulating it. If not, we will only get drowned by our own selfishness that is developing only for one's sake. There is a danger of getting into superficialities of things which tend to blind us. We have to get into the core and experience its totality not just a part of it. Then, we will never be left without direction.

Traditional Health System: Where to? Indeed this is not just a question that the Philippines should answer but for the whole world, because we are all accountable to humanity, to the universe and most of all, to the indigenous peoples who have given us what we have now.

At this time when there is global consciousness towards indigenous knowledge, it is crucial to stop for a while and contemplate again on the basic question that one has to answer before starting again. Why are we doing this? For whom? For what? And from the vision will be carved out answers to those questions. As the Proverbs remind us, "Without vision, it will not persist." And if we believe, we shall see. And then we'll say: "It's magic!"