

McMaster SIHI 2005 – Final Report, Traditional Medicine Group

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Purpose

The goal of our inquiry was to gain a variety of perspectives on Traditional and Allopathic medicinal practices in the Jaunsaur-Bawar region of North India. Of particular interest was the relationship between Traditional and Allopathic medicine, in terms of both philosophy and practice, as well as the evolution and transmission of Traditional medical knowledge.

Definition of Terms

Allopathy

According to *Merriam-Webster's Medical Dictionary*, allopathy is “a system of medical practice that aims to combat disease by use of remedies producing effects different from or incompatible with those produced by the special disease treated.”

Modern allopathy is characterized by a reductionist approach to illness which treats the body as a system which can be understood by breaking it down into its component systems.

Modern allopathy was introduced to the Jaunsaur-Bawar region by the British during the the 19th century. Local Allopathic practices can be either private- or government-run, but all formally trained allopathic doctors have an MBBS degree. Government doctors generally have a salary and so their income is independent of the number of patients they receive. All MBBS doctors, upon completion of their degree, have to engage in three years of government service before they can set up a private clinic.

Traditional Medicine

The term “traditional medicine” encompasses many different forms, philosophies, and practices, including Ayurveda, Unani, and Homopathy. In the Jaunsar-Bawar region, we found there to be three major tiers of traditional medicine:

Home Remedies: simple herbal remedies prepared from local plants, used to treat general symptoms of disease, such as fever, coughing, and nausea. Knowledge is generally passed through families.

Village Vaids: local villagers who prepare herbal medicines from local plants. Unlike home remedies, their treatments are based upon a diagnosis of the individual patient. Although they have specialized training, they usually rely on other work, such as farming, to make a living, and as such, rarely charge for their services. Almost always men, their knowledge is usually passed from father to son and rarely shared with other vaids, and never with patients. We uncovered some evidence that communication between local vaids was increasing in the form of “committees” which were also attended by BMS doctors (see below).

Trained BAMS/BMS: Practitioners having a Bachelor of Ayurvedic Medicine & Surgery (BAMS) or Bachelor of Ayurvedic Medicine and Science (BMS) are formally trained in Ayurveda and generally have a good understanding of Ayurvedic philosophy. Diagnosis is based on observation of the individual and treatments are usually tailored to that individual's needs. In addition, the BAMS degree includes some training in allopathic medicine.

Both government and private practitioners are present in the Jaunsaur-Bawar region.

Villager's Perspective

The villagers' conception of disease is primarily based on symptoms rather than causes. Illnesses are described as a "fever" or "nausea" rather than as infections. Knowledge of pathogens was rudimentary and usually learned through health education programs developed by SMTA or the local allopath in Mayurona.

Because sickness reduces an individual's ability to work, speed of treatment is highly valued. Apart from curing the patient, one of the major goals of medicine, in the villagers' eyes, is to facilitate their return to work.

Based on the conversations we had with many of the villagers, we developed a "standard model" which outlines what action villagers are most likely to take when they become ill, and their perceptions of the positive and negative elements of each treatment.

The "Standard Model" of Treatment

<i>Home Remedies</i>	→	<i>Local Vaid</i>	→	<i>Allopathic Doctor</i>
Cheap		Usually free		Expensive
Slow		Slow		Fast
Locally available		Local to village		Less accessible, non-local
No side effects/natural		No side effects/natural		Side effects
Tradition/Habit		Trust because local		"outsider effect"
Self-reliance		Personal care		Bureaucratic, impersonal

(negatively perceived traits are highlighted grey)

For most villagers, the factor which played the greatest role in determining what treatment is selected is cost. Most villagers, when asked, said that they would prefer to receive allopathic treatment because it is faster, but indicated that its cost was prohibitive.

However, the remaining factors do play a role under certain circumstances. For example, in villages fortunate and wealthy enough to have their own hospital (or had road access to one) allopathic medicine was often used before home remedies and local vaid were consulted. This was the case in Mayurona and its neighbouring villages, as well as in villages connected by road to Quansi, a small town where several allopathic doctors

practiced.

Practitioner's Perspective

Allopathic Doctor

The allopathic doctors believe that home remedies and Ayurvedic medicine can be effective. In fact, one doctor we spoke to said he himself used these forms of medicine. However, they believe that the Ayurvedic doctors do not always have a complete understanding of medicine. For example, they may prepare plants without cleaning them, thus resulting in further damage to the patient. They believe allopathic medicine is effective because it has been proven to be and the mechanisms of its treatment are known.

The allopathic doctors believe that Ayurvedic doctors who dispense allopathic medicine without being trained in the field ("quacks") are a problem as this situation can often lead to misdiagnosis. They believe quacks exist because of the high demand for allopathic medicine.

The allopathic doctors do recognize that their medicines can often have side effects and do not always work the same way in each individual.

Ayurvedic Doctor (Village vaid)

Some of the village vairs think that allopathic doctors often misdiagnose their patients and that allopathic medicine does not work at all. However, other village vairs believe that allopathic medicine can be effective and will refer their own patients to an allopathic doctor if their own treatments are not working after a few days.

Some village vairs believe that pre-packaged Ayurvedic medicines (that often come in pill form) do work, assuming that the patient has been correctly diagnosed. Conversely, other vairs believe that these pills will not work due to the fact that they have not been ingested in their proper form.

All the village vairs we interviewed said they do not give away the remedies for their medicines because they either feel this will make the medicines ineffective or because people would stop coming to them if they knew how to make the medicines on their own. They also believe that the treatments to new, emerging diseases lie somewhere in the Himalayas. None of the vairs interviewed knew the philosophy behind Ayurvedic medicine.

Ayurvedic Doctor (Government vaid)

The government vaid we interviewed was well read in both Ayurvedic and Allopathic medicine but only has the authority to prescribe Ayurvedic medicine. He believes that Allopathic medicine can be very strong and is unnatural as it is made from synthetic materials. He believes that this form of medicine does treat the illness or pathogen that is causing the disease, but it does not necessarily help the body heal. He explains the mandate of Ayurvedic medicine to be enhancing one's immune system so that one can rid one's self of the pathogen which is causing the disease.

The government vaid does not agree with the commercialized forms of Ayurvedic medicine because that medicine is made with the intention to earn money, not to help people. Also, he believes that the form of Ayurvedic medicine is very important and if one changes the form, the medicine will no longer be effective. The government vaid explains how Ayurvedic medicine does have fast acting treatments, however, they have been banned by

the government. A good example of this is opium. This vaidd goes on to explain that the reason Ayurvedic medicine is not too popular among villagers is because of a lack of education. For Ayurvedic medicine to work one cannot have a superficial knowledge base, one must have a deep understanding of phenomena. If one does not understand Ayurvedic medicine, they will not have faith in its treatments and thus the treatments will not work. The Ayurvedic doctor said that no new treatments are being discovered in Ayurvedic medicine today, and current research is focusing understanding the mechanism by which these treatments work in the body. He believes that Ayurvedic medicine has a bright future since knowledge can change its form but will never die and since everything returns back on itself – meaning that there will be a return to Ayurvedic medicine in the near future. We can see this occurring in the Western World already with the newly found interest in traditional medicines such as homoeopathy and Ayurveda.

Our Perspective

We believe that Ayurvedic medicine is beneficial to the villager's in this area because it is a self-sustaining form of medicine in that all the resources for it are available in plenty. This is a positive factor because it means less reliance on external parties. As well, the way this form of medicine is not only very natural but the way in which it is practiced is very ethical – as the vaidas do not charge for their treatments. As well, Ayurvedic medicine requires faith in the medicine which demands that doctors establish a good rapport with their patients. In North America, good patient-provider relations has been shown to improve adherence to treatment regimes. In addition, Ayurvedic medicine acknowledges that factors other than physical factors play a role in illness. This parallels our own knowledge of medicine as we are slowly adapting the biopsychosocial model in the Western World which states that not only biological, but psychological and social factors also play a role in causing illness.

Though we feel Ayurvedic medicine can be promising, we are unsure of its effectiveness in treating disease, as no research has been properly conducted to factor in the placebo effect of this medicine. In addition, Ayurvedic medicine is being faced with a few problems – its commercialization, its decline in popularity (due to the introduction of fast acting allopathic medicine) and the loss of its knowledge (due to the fact that vaidas are passing away without passing on their knowledge to anyone).

Allopathic medicine also has its benefits as it is proved to be effective and works rather quickly. However, there are a lack of adequate allopathic resources and doctors. This is problematic because it leads to the emergence of “quacks” who may end up doing more harm to the patients than good. As well, if this region to implement allopathic medicine, they will be dependent on the Western world for their resources for some time.