

TRADITIONAL MEDICINE PRACTICE AND CANCER IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES: COMPLIMENTARY OR DETRIMENTAL

DR. BAFFOUR AWUAH

RADIATION ONCOLOGIST AND HEAD ONCOLOGY
DIRECTORATE

KOMFO ANOKYE TEACHING HOSPITAL, KUMASI.
GHANA

Kumasi, Ghana



BACKGROUND

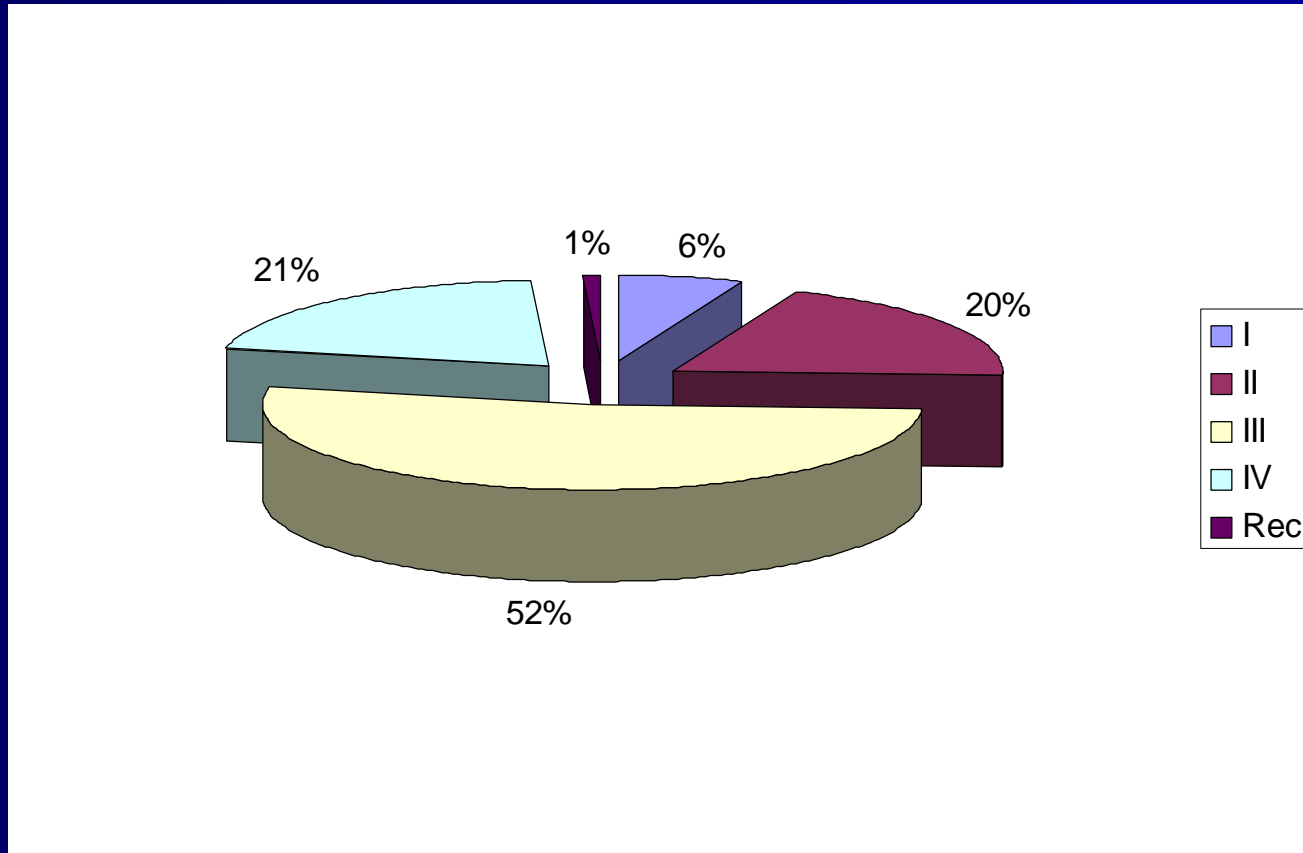
- Developing countries currently bear 50 percent of the global cancer burden and are projected to bear 60 percent by year 2020 (WHO Report).

- The rise in the cancer case incidence is ascribed to social, lifestyle and environmental changes, concurrent with economic development and globalization.

Why are we concern about traditional medicine?

- Over 80 percent of cancer patients in developing countries are diagnosed at late to end stage disease.
- Consequently, treatment outcome is dismally poor.

Stage at Presentation of Cancers at KATH Oncology















- These patients have all used some form of traditional medicine or consulted a spiritualist before coming to hospital, hence the late presentation.

Common Reasons Given

- Ignorance, poverty, low level of cancer awareness due to lack of education among others are the usual reasons many of us ascribe to the abysmal outcome of cancer patients from the developing world.

- We have all consciously or unconsciously ignored the impact of traditional medicine practitioners in our effort to manage our cancer patients with curative intention no matter how early they present with their ailment.

- More than 90 percent of the Head and Neck cancer patients presenting at KATH Oncology have consulted a traditional medical practitioner for intervention before coming to the hospital.

- Over 60 percent of breast cancer patients have applied some form of local herbs before presentation.
- Many patients with pelvic malignancies like cervical cancers, colorectals and bladder tumours had also taken traditional or local herbs before coming to hospital.

- Many people see diseases as life threatening, only when they have an uncomfortable feeling like pain, burning sensation, etc but to the surprise of many, most cancers start insidiously with painless mass or ulcer till they become locally advanced, where pain becomes a prominent feature of the symptom.

Types of Medical Systems

In Ghana and most developing countries there are two types of medical systems:

- 1. Traditional medical system and
- 2. Scientific medical system

- These two institutions of medicine hold different world views regarding their respective practices.
- Any conflict, therefore which may arise between these two forms of medicine has a disruptive effect on the well being of the people.

This is what many of us are experiencing now.

Traditional Medicine

- The service is performed through the utilization of magico-religious acts and concepts.
- The malefic action of another human being or intervention by a supernatural power may cause illness, which may be cured by resort to the appropriate magico-religious formula or application to the supernatural power.

Scientific Medicine

- We use the term scientific or orthodox medicine to indicate a view in which the rational explanation of natural events is in terms of cause and effect.
- Cause is viewed as natural in contrast to supernatural causation.

- In other words, the causation by supernatural powers has no place in scientific medicine per se.
- The concept and perception of diseases and their causation differ between the orthodox and traditional medical personnel.

- While physical, chemical and infectious agents as well as congenital and genetic abnormalities are believed to be the causes of many diseases in western or orthodox medicine.

- In traditional medicine, spiritual and supernatural powers among others are firmly rooted in the thinking of many to be the true cause of many diseases.

Note:

- In medical practice, it is often said, the practitioner, whom a patient consults with an ailment the first time contributes immensely to the final outcome of the disease.

- Population of many developing countries like Ghana is rural.
- Many traditional medicine practitioners reside in rural communities where orthodox medical practitioners are non-existent.
For that matter patients' usual first point of consultation is the local care giver who incidentally is the traditional healer.

Questions to guide the discussions:

1. How does the traditional medicine institution serve the present needs of the society?
2. To what extent has the introduction of scientific medicine led to changes in practice of traditional medicine?

3. What type of or kind of organizational base supports either type of medicine and why?

4. In what circumstances do the sick prefer one type of medical attention to the other?

5. What are some of the social consequences arising from the introduction of scientific medicine?

NEED FOR INTEGRATION

- Traditional medicine operates independently.
- Operating in secrecy, they could cause more harm than good so why not bring them into the open to assess what they can do.
- The training procedure to become a traditional medicine practitioner has remained relatively unaltered.

- The trainees are still down primarily for the illiterate segments of the population.
- It could be interesting to find out if literates could be recruited into the services of traditional medicine, if it becomes an open legitimate activity.

The Question:

- Traditional medical system **complementary** or **detrimental**?

Answer

- Can be **complementary** or **detrimental** depending upon ones` experience.
- **BUT** the focus should rather be how we can evidently research into the mode of practice and application of traditional medicine in order to deal comprehensively with the above question.

SUGGESTION

- Further period of training for the practitioner of traditional medicine in the principles of hygiene.
- Research into the therapeutic potential of traditional medicine.

- Medical students to be taught to accept traditional practitioners as playing complementary role in the art of healing.
- This would involve a study of traditional medical practices and giving such a study a place in the curriculum.

- There is the need to conduct interdisciplinary research which will look into the therapeutic claims of the traditional medicine men.
- There is the need to study the types of and caliber of patients who frequent the service of traditional medicine.

- There is the need to look at the number of patients who actively receive “CURES” from traditional healers.

Conclusion

- It is a mistake to reject out of hand, without objective research finding, a traditional form of medical practice.
- The psychology and medicines of which may possess certain valid features.

“We must learn again from the scratch,
without contempt and with patience how to
talk to our fellow men and listen carefully to
what they are saying:

This is our only claim to integrity”

(R. Oppenheimer)

THANK YOU