



# Traditional healers face off with science

A recent World Health Organization (WHO) endorsement of traditional healers suggests that the desire to be culturally sensitive has over-ridden the basic scientific principles of modern medicine, says a South African “ethnomedicine practitioner.” Siphon Kunene, a graduate of the African Herbal College who has practised for 8 years, spoke about his research into traditional healers in Africa and their role in prehospital care during a recent conference on emergency medicine in Johannesburg.

Most Africans apparently agree with WHO’s 1977 resolution that African traditional healers should be part of the primary health care team. A 1993 survey conducted by the South African Medical Research Council found that 80% of South African patients consult a traditional healer before seeking care from a nurse or doctor, or at a hospital. But Kunene found many problems — and

potential dangers — surround traditional healing.

A person becomes a traditional healer through spiritual endowment, not a course of study. In assessing the cause of a disease, traditional healers first attempt to identify *who* is responsible for it. They believe that the patient has been bewitched and vengeance is needed to prevent progression and remove the source of the disease. The result is interpersonal violence and crime resulting from the need for vengeance, says Kunene.

Next the traditional healers perform supernatural divination to determine if the patient has violated any pre-established order and then seek their ancestors’ forgiveness through sacrifices and rituals to appease the anger of the dead.

Finally they prescribe “muti,” a secret concoction that may include human body parts. According to Kunene, muti is the “perfect” pharmaceutical. If

the patient dies after taking it, his death is due to ancestral wrath. If improvement does not occur, it is because the patient failed to take it in the proper kneeling position or was facing the wrong direction. Of course, many illnesses improve spontaneously, so the muti often appears to be very effective. Some notorious traditional healers are known to administer the muti personally by performing sexual acts.

Traditional healers have been around for thousands of years and are an established part of many African cultures. They undoubtedly provide an important supportive role in the health care of the community, and perhaps some of their muti prescriptions contain appropriate, pharmacologically active ingredients, says Kunene. However, he wonders whether their reliance on myths and magic means they are simply exploiting an ignorant population. — *Dr. Garth Dickinson, Harare*

## In the news . . .

### **Mammography accreditation growing trend**

*Montreal* — Nearly half of all Canadian mammography units have been accredited by the Canadian Association of Radiologists. The 6-year-old voluntary Mammography Accreditation Program now has 297 accredited units, which account for 46% of the total. Applications for accreditation have been received from 69% of Canadian units. “It is hoped that all mammography units in Canada will soon become accredited,” Dr. Nancy Wadden, chair of the mammography accreditation committee, stated in a letter to *CMAJ*. For information, see [www.car.ca](http://www.car.ca).

### **Falls cause most acute care admissions**

*Ottawa* — Falls are the leading cause of injury-related admissions to Ontario acute care hospitals, the Canadian Institute for Health Information says.

Of the 68 000 injury-related admissions in 1996–97, 58% were caused by falls, followed by motor vehicle accidents (14%) and intentional injuries (6%). The average length of stay was 11 days for falls, compared with 9 days for all other injuries. Among people over 65, falls accounted for 86% of hospital admissions; twice as many older women were admitted to hospital because of falls than men. See [www.cihi.ca](http://www.cihi.ca) for more information.

### **Better online pediatric info**

*Ottawa* — The Canadian Paediatric Society’s revamped Web site offers accurate information for physicians and parents. Its *Caring for Kids* section features more than 50 succinct, easy-to-understand documents on common concerns such as healthy babies, vaccination, diet and childhood infections. Check it out at [www.cps.ca](http://www.cps.ca).