

Traditional healers are causing treatment delay among patients with psychosis in Hospital Kuala Lumpur: fact or fallacy?

ABSTRACT

Objective: Mental health services in Malaysia often face competition from traditional healers especially among patients with psychosis. The objective of the study is to determine whether patients who sought help earlier from traditional healers had longer duration of untreated psychosis (DUP), and more adverse experiences in pathways to psychiatric care. **Methods:** This is a hospital-based cross-sectional study of 50 inpatients with first-episode psychosis in Hospital Kuala Lumpur. Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-IV (Diagnostic and statistical manual, 4th edition) Clinical Version for Axis I Disorders (SCID-CV) was used for establishing diagnosis. Onset of psychosis was defined as any one positive symptom with a score of >3 on the Positive and Negative Syndrome Scale (PANSS). Socio-demographic data, information on pathways and treatment delaying factors were determined through face-to-face interview and semi-structured questionnaire. **Results:** Fifty-four percent of the patients had at least one contact with traditional healers prior to consulting psychiatric service, and it was the most popular first point of non-psychiatric help-seeking contact (48%). Contact with traditional healers was not associated with age, gender, ethnic, education level, longer DUP or treatment delay, and admissions with violent behaviour or police assistance. Of those who had sought help from traditional healers, one third were recommended by at least one of their traditional healers to seek medical help. **Conclusion:** Consultation involving traditional healers was a popular choice, and not associated with treatment delay. Traditional healers in an urban setting may be potential collaborators in managing patients with first-episode psychosis. Future research should explore the frontiers of such collaborative work.

Keyword: Traditional healer; Duration of untreated psychosis (DUP); Treatment delay.