

# The Islamic Healing Approach to Cancer Treatment in Malaysia

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## Abstract

Islamic healing is frequently sought as a choice by Muslim cancer patients in Malaysia. Despite its widespread use, limited documented evidence is available on Islamic healing practice in cancer treatment. Such information would give better insight about Islamic healing in cancer treatment to guide treatment policies and practices accordingly. The purpose of this study is to understand Islamic healing practice in conjunction with conventional medicine for cancer treatment. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate in investigating patient perspectives and experiences related to Islamic healing. Eighteen cancer survivors who had received both conventional medicine and Islamic healing during their treatment were identified by referrals from support group members, Islamic healers, friends, and record from cancer call centres (KanHelpline) as participants in the study. The data were collected through in depth interview. Interviews data were transcribed verbatim and were analyzed concurrently using the constant comparative method. Islamic healing treatment can be divided by 2 forms; 1) recitation of Quran verses as a main method with du'a and sunnah (voluntary) salat and (2) combination of herbs with recitation of Quran verses, du'a and healing water. The fact Islamic healing that practiced by the healer is consistently with Islam tenant. There is a place for Islamic healing in a Muslim community and this finding could guide policy makers in providing health system in the country.

## 1. Introduction

Incidence of cancer continues to increase worldwide, especially in developing nations. The World Health Organization (WHO) reported that in 2005, seventy percent of deaths related to cancer occurred in developing countries. Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) refers to health care practices that are not typically offered in conventional medical facilities. One of the forms of CAM practiced worldwide in varying forms is traditional medicine. According to the World Health Organization, traditional medicine is defined as:

A sum total of the knowledge, skills and practices based on the theories, beliefs and experiences indigenous to different cultures, whether explicable or not, used in the maintenance of health as well as prevention, diagnosis, improvement or treatment of physical and mental illness (Siti et al., 2009).

Malaysia is a unique, multiethnic and multi-religious country comprised of approximately 60% Malays, 30% Chinese, 10% Indian and a small minority of other racial groups. Islam is the official religion practiced by the Malay and minority of other ethnics. The mainstream health care delivery system in Malaysia is based on conventional medicine, but there is a growing interest in traditional and complementary medicine (T&CM) including "bomoh" (Malay traditional healers), as well as Chinese and Indian indigenous medicine (Razali & Yassin, 2008). One popular form of T&CM in Malaysia, Islamic medicine is defined as medicine whose basic paradigms, concepts, values and procedures conforms to or do not contradict the Quran (revealed by Allah to the Prophet Muhammad) and *sunnah* (recorded and authenticated saying and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad) (Kasule, 1997 pg. 1). According to Asman (2008), Islamic medicine is categorized as traditional medicine since it has long been used. The concept of Islamic medicine is well known in Muslim societies and goes by different terms such as, Islamic healing, spiritual healing, or Quranic healing. Regardless of term, the main treatment is by using the Quran. In the fundamental of Islam, this kind of healing involved physical, psychological and spiritual processes (Yucel, 2007).

## Type of Islamic healing

Islamic healing is practiced throughout the world including non-Muslim countries. In Muslim country like Pakistan, different types of healing are embraced. For many Pakistanis, however, traditional healers are the first "port call" when they experience health, emotional or spiritual challenges. In the case of cancer, traditional practices like *Dam Darood*, spiritual healing and *Hakeem* are commonly used by cancer patients (Tovey et al., 05). In *Hakeem*, a practitioner uses the Hikmat (Tibb-e-Unani) approach to address illness that is commonly practice among Muslim communities in South Asia. *Dam Darood* is Prophetic medicine and other local practices that are delivered by Pirs, or holy men. Pirs read verses of Quran and blow the words towards the patients for the bless power effect. Meanwhile, *Wazifa* is the practice of repeating certain Quranic verses for extended periods of

time (weeks or months) (Tovey et al., 05). Although many Pakistani cancer patients support traditional medicine, they do not necessarily view them as effective forms of cancer treatment. Traditional medicine plays a greater role in emotional and spiritual well being rather than curative options (Tovey et al., 05).

In Iran, prayer and spiritual healing is the most common method used by cancer patients as a complement to conventional cancer treatment (Rezaei et al., 08). They practice two types of prayers, individually or in congregation. The prayer help them to cope with the disease symptoms, anxiety-provoking medical procedures, illness experiences, and help them withstand physical and physiological crises triggered by the diagnosis and subsequent cancer treatment (Rezaei et al., 2008; Villagomez, 2005).

Meanwhile, in non-Muslim country like America, the Muslims have been reported to utilize traditional medicines based on Islamic religious text and Islamic worship practices. This including recites the Quran and hadith, performing the prayer, Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) and du'a (supplication) (Padela et al., 2012).

In Malaysian context, majority consult traditional practitioners who are primarily traditional (charms, spirit-possession, hysteria, etc.), physical and psychological healers (including anxiety due to events such as examination and work interview) (Heggenhougen, 1980). In Kelantan and Terengganu, where of majority Malay Muslim community still practices traditional health care, many prefer to consult a traditional healer (bomoh). The bomoh practice Ruqyah (incantation) with the recitation of Quranic verses for purpose of prevention and treatment of disease caused by the *jin*<sup>1</sup> (Deuraseh, 2009). For cancer patients, they seek spiritual healers to receive special prayers or blessings for their treatment (Mazanah et al., 2012)

## The Current Study

Previous research from multiple national and cultural contexts provides a glimpse of various Islamic healing methods. To date, however, few studies have addressed Islamic healing methods specifically for cancer treatment. In the context of Malaysia, many patients rely on Islamic healing. However, a large number of patients lack information and not adequately know about the practice of Islamic healing. The lack of understanding lead to misconception about Islamic healing where patients may rely on this healing without seeking conventional system which places them under grave danger. Hence, it is important to understand kind of Islamic healing from cancer patients' perspectives. Further seek information would guide health policy maker on Islamic healing.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Data collection

This study sought to explore the kind of Islamic healing practices utilized by women Malay Muslim cancer patients. We were interested to access patients' perspectives; as such, a qualitative research approach was deemed the most suitable design and data collection method (Merriam, 2009; Corbin & Strauss, 2007).

Purposive sampling technique was used to identify participants. We sought women Malay Muslim cancer patients who had accessed both the conventional medical system and Islamic healers in the course of their diagnosis and treatment, and both Malay or English speaking. In order to ensure the eligibility of the participants, the researcher called and checked with the potential participants as a way to make sure they fit the study criteria. The researchers identified cancer patients by referrals from support group members, friends, record from cancer call center (KanHelpline) and recommendation by Islamic healers. We developed the interview guide for in-depth interviews based on previous literature and personal experiences of the researchers with 2 pilot interviews. We interviewed a total of 18 cancer patients. Eight of the 18 are from Kuala Lumpur (the capital city) and surroundings. The rest were from the Northeast, Northwest, and Southern parts of Peninsular Malaysia. The interviews were conducted at a place of the patients' choice; five chose their own homes and another five were conducted at their offices. Three interviews were done at Islamic healing centers, two at cancer support groups, two at the Cancer Education and Support center (CaRE), and one at a restaurant. All interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. All of the interviews were conducted in Malay and translated in to English by bilingual graduate students.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Islamic belief, *Jinn* are malevolent spiritual beings that cause harm to people who encounter them. They are mentioned in the Qur'an and other Islamic texts and inhabit an unseen world in dimensions beyond the visible universe of humans (Wikipedia, 2014)

## 2.2 Data analysis

We used constant comparative method to analyze the data (Merriam, 2009; Corbin & Strauss, 2007; Patton, 2002). This procedure consists of first open coding of each interview transcript for relevant data that is responsive to the study's research questions. These coded segments were then combined through axial coding into themes/categories that are explanatory of the phenomenon. The same process was undertaken with the transcript of the second interview. Themes/categories from the second transcript were compared with the first transcript and a set of themes/ categories were developed from the two interviews. This process continued through subsequent interviews. The final set of themes/categories derived from the analysis was the findings of the study. These findings were supported by quotes from the transcripts. The quotes were used to support themes. We informally debriefed after each interview and informally compared respondents' perspectives as we were collecting the data. Concurrent data analysis allows for theoretical sampling to take place (adjusting who we want to interview according to our emerging findings) and allows for checking for internal validity.

## 2.3 Ethical considerations

Formal ethical approval was obtained from the Medical Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Universiti Putra Malaysia. Informed consent was explained to each informant and written consent forms were obtained

## 3. Findings

Data were obtained from 18 cancer patients (Table 1). Their cancer survival longevity ranged from 1 to 15 years. Their level of education varied from 6th grade to Doctor of Philosophy (PhD). Most of the women were employed. The results showed 2 major kinds of treatment practices by healers: 1) Recitation of Quran verses as a main method with du'a and sunnah (voluntary) salat and 2) combination of herbs with recitation of Quran verses, du'a, and healing water. We elaborate on the findings below.

### 3.1 Recitation of Quran verses as a main method with du'a and sunnah (voluntary) salat

Participants reported that the main form of Islamic healing they received was by recitation of Quran verses coupled with du'a (supplication) and sunnah (voluntary) salat. Each participant mentioned that reciting the Quran was significant to their lives before seeking a healer and became even more meaningful with their cancer diagnosis. One of the participants, Aisyah, said that she practiced Quranic therapy since she was diagnosed with cancer. After seeing an Islamic healer, she became more committed and focused on more specific verses like Surah Al-Kahf. At the advice of her healer, she also began performing sunnah salat like the tahajjud (night) salat as part of her healing regiment.

For the first treatment, Yana read Quran after salat subuh (during fajr time) , and then she began reciting Surah (chapter) Al-Mukminun, verses 91 to 100 and Surah Al-Hajj, verse 31-55 three times per day after prescribed by her healer. After the second visit, the healer prescribed a new Quran verses to recite. Hanim also had the same experiences as Yana because they were being treated by the same healer. Rahmah did not just recite the Quran but also sought out the translation and meaning of each of the verses, even though understanding the translation is not part of the healing protocol. According to the respondents, the healer explained that Quranic verses are a *mukjizat* (miracle) that have their own healing power. In the case of Rozana, the healer performs salat hajat (prayer done for the fulfillment of wishes) for her. At the same time, she also drinks healing water, recites Quran and reads supplications (du'a) asking for God to heal her.

### 3.2 Combination of herbs with recitation of Quran verses, du'a and healing water

Participants reported that some healers prescribed herbs as a tool in their healing protocols with the combination of Quran verses and healing water. In addition, most healers recommended that the informants read du'a and perform more sunnah salat to cleanse their souls. They believe that this cleansing will increase the chances that the 'medicine' will take hold and have a positive effect on the patients.

Mak Uda, Rahayu, Zahra and Rosmah experienced treatment that makes used of different types of herbs. Mak Uda narrated:

The "ustaz" asked me to bring 7 "buah keras" (candlenut). I need to pound the fruit with coconut oil and paste it to the breast while reciting selawat (praise to Prophet Muhammad)

She was told by the healer to practice the treatment to help kill the cancer cell. Ustaz (religious teacher) also gave Mak Uda 5 liters of water to drink and if she wanted to bath with the water, she needs to add in with other water. Besides that, Ustaz also recommend her to recite Surah al-Mulk verse 13 especially when she in depressed.

Meanwhile Rahayu went to one famous Islamic healing center in Klang valley, she explained:

The Ustaz gave me “pokok kenerak” (a type of herbal tree) and he asked me to boil and drink it (whether use the wood, leaves or it root). I have to boil it from 3 glasses to become 1 glass and have to drink it for 3 days. It becomes more liquefied and harder to drink because of the bad taste.

The ustaz claimed that “pokok kenerak” is traditionally used for cervix cancer and proven scientifically as anti-cancer agent. The healer also recites verses of Quran directly to her. She needs to continuously recite the Quran and selawat syifa (praise to Prophet Muhammad)

In the case of Zahra, she used 2 kinds of herbs as she explained:

The healer used “kunyit putih” (white turmeric) and “rumput sambau” (goosegrass). I need to pound them and paste the salve to my breast. I wear bra as usual from morning until dusk. The healer also gave me one bottle of apricot seeds that I need to finish.

According to Zahra, the healer used those herbs to clean the skin that affected by cancer. Rosmah was also asked to drink water mixed with herbs after the healer recites prayers and gives her boiled “akar kayu” (plant roots) to drink but the healer did not mentioned which type of plant. In Ani’s case, the healer gave her healing water and asked her to recite Quran verses, for example Al-Mukminin. Zakiah was asked by the healer to bathe with salted water for 3 days and drink zam-zam water that was blessed by him (the healer). Liya’s condition involved bleeding without knowing the cause. She narrated, “My mom went to seek the Ustaz and he gave me blessed water to drink. I drank it and I felt very cold and after 3 days, my bleeding stopped.” She also received treatment from various Islamic healers that mostly included a flower bath, lime bath and other natural healing remedies.

#### 4 Discussion

Findings from this study are discussed according to the kind of treatment: 1) Recitation of Quran verses as a main method with du’a and sunnah (voluntary) salat and 2) Combination of herbs with recitation of Quran verses, du’a, and healing water.

##### 4.1 Recitation of Quran verses as a main method with du’a and sunnah (voluntary) salat

An important element in Islamic healing is the Quran which is believed to have *Baraka*, or divine blessing, which is received by the patient when it is recited. All healers refer to passages from the Quran and hadith (saying of Prophet Muhammad) (Hoffer, 2000). Moreover, Quran itself is believed to be a cure and a mercy; its verses are often used in the form of incantations, invocations and prayers (Asman, 2008). Muslims believe that these verses become ‘activated’ when recited and the healing that follows is from God (Allah). Some of the healing verses include, for example,

*And we sent down in the Qur’an such things that have healing and mercy for the believers, (The Qur’an Chapter 17, Verse 82)*

*And declare (O Muhammad) that (the Qur’an) is guidance and healing for the believers. (The Qur’an, Chapter 41, Verse 44)*

In Malay Muslim society, Surah Al-Fatihah (the opening chapter) has been used widely for incantation. This surah is also regarded as a major healing aid. The Prophet Muhammad Peace Be upon Him (PBUH) is reported to have said that Surah Al-Fatihah is highly effective when used for medical purposes. In addition to Surah Al-Fatihah, there are other surah such as the verse of the throne (al-Kursi), the muawwidhat verses (surah Surah al-

Falaq, Surah al-Nas and Surah al-Ikhlas), and the verse of 1000 dinars. This is supported by hadith narrated by Aisha (R.A),

*Narrated by Aisha (R.A.): "During the Prophet's (PBUH) fatal illness, he used to recite the Mu'auwidhatain (surat al-nas and surat al-falaq) and then blow his breath over his body. When his illness was aggravated, I used to recite those two surahs and blow my breath over him and make him rub his body with his own hand for its blessings" (Kasule, 1997).*

Thus, the Muslim turned back to God (Allah SWT) and place hope to Him (Tohar et al., 2011). This is supported by Prophet Muhammad said narrated by Ali,

*"The Quran is the best of all medicines" (Yucel, 2007).*

#### 4.2 Combination of herbs with recitation of Quran verses, du'a and healing water

In Islam, Muslims are urged to look for cure for any disease as to all disease, there is a cure. In two hadiths, he reported to have said,

*"Allah has sent down both the disease and the cure, and He has appointed a cure for every disease, so treat yourselves medically",*

*"The one who sent down the disease sent down the remedy", "For every disease, Allah has given a cure". (Zaid and Saad, 2010)*

Water plays a significant role in Islamic healing. It is used as holy water (air tawar) by reciting special prayers or verses from Quran (Razali & Yassin, 2008). The patients are recommended to drink "blessed" water sometimes mixed with safran, blessed honey and dates (Adib, 2004). Zam zam water from a holy well in Mecca also has been used for healing benefits (Al-Rawi & Fetters, 2012). Healers also recite the Quran over the patients or into natural products like water, honey, salt, and olive oil (Ally & Laher, 2008). Herbs or plant based product have been widely used since ancient times to treat and prevent illness or to improve health where has been mentioned in Quran and particularly the sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (Momin, 1996). The Quran verse as example,

*Then to eat of all the produce (of the earth), and find with skill the spacious paths of its Lord: there issues from within their bodies a drink of varying colours, wherein is healing for men: verily in this is a Sign for those who give thought (The Qur'an Chapter 16, Verse 69)*

Du'a, it is a symbol of servitude from the servant to God, and a mark of God's mercy to his servant (Yucel 2007, 12) or it is a form of worship and asking favors from God. Muslim practices recitation of Quran, du'a, sunnah (voluntary) salat as a sign of humility and hope to God (Allah) as a spiritual aspect for disease cure. Meanwhile, the herbs and holy water are for the physical healing.

## 5. Conclusion

The study revealed that Islamic healing practice is structured in the form of two main approaches. Islamic healing treatment mainly are 1) Recitation of Quran verses as a main method with du'a and sunnah (voluntary) salat and 2) Combination of herbs with recitation of Quran verses, du'a and healing water. The practices suggest that Islamic healing seeks to help patients health includes both spiritually and physically. Despite the scientific advances in conventional cancer treatment, Islamic healing remains accepted by cancer patients in Malaysia. This is because the Quran is a primary source of Islamic teaching and is perceived to have healing characteristics (Al-Rawi et al., 2011). The Islamic healing practiced nowadays stems from the medicine of the Prophet (al-tibb al-nabawi). An Islamic practice is guided by two forms, the Quran and sunnah. The fact that Islamic healing practiced by the healer are consistently with Islam tenants, cancer patients observed them. There is a place for Islamic healing in a Muslim community. This study could guide policy makers in providing health system in the country.

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Table 1: Participants profile and type of treatment

No	Name	Age	Occupation	Education level	Type of cancer	Type of treatment
1	Mak Uda	55	Retired	Diploma	Breast	Healing water , herbs, du'a and Quran verses
2	Liya	29	Admin Officer	Diploma	Defuse large B- cell lymphoma	Healing water, du'a and Quran verses
3	Rahayu	35	Teacher	Bachelor	Ovary	Herbs, healing water , du'a and Quran verses
4	Aisyah	44	Government staff	Bachelor	Thyroid	Herbs, healing water
5	Rin	33	Administrative Assistant	SPM	Stomach	Healing water, du'a and Quran verses
6	Yusra	44	Home maker	Bachelor	Uterus	Herbs, healing water and Quran verses
7	Yana	52	Retired	SPM	Breast	Healing water , du'a and Quran verses
8	Rahmah	55	Administrative	Secondary school	Breast	Healing water, du'a and Quran verses
9	Rosmah	57	Matron	Degree	Breast	Herbs, healing water, du'a and Quran verses
10	Ani	51	Nurse	Secondary school	Breast	Healing water, du'a and Quran verses
11	Nisa	59	Retired teacher	Diploma	Breast	Herbs, healing water, du'a and Quran verse
12	Rozana	45	Administrative Assistant	Secondary school	Breast	Healing water, Quran verses, sunnah (voluntary) salat, and d'ua
13	Hanim	54	Lecturer	PhD	Breast	Healing water, du'a and Quran verses
14	Zahra	53	Teacher	Diploma	Breast	Herbs, healing water, du'a and Quran verses
15	Zakiah	58	Home maker	Secondary school	Breast	Healing water and du'a
16	Aina	52	Teacher	Diploma	Ovary	Quran verses and du'a
17	Zaidah	58	Retired nurse	Diploma	Lung	Quran verses and du'a
18	Mariam	62	Retired nurse	SPM	Breast	Quran verses and du'a

\*All the names are pseudonyms