

A Narrative Review of Health-Seeking Behaviour in Malaysia: Factors and Emerging Themes

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a critical assessment of research on health-seeking behaviour in Malaysia. As the topic is both medically and anthropologically relevant, this narrative review aims to collate and synthesise anthropological and medical studies conducted in Malaysia on health-seeking behaviour among different populations in the country. The specific goal of this narrative review is to identify the methodology employed in such studies, compile a list of medical conditions for which health-seeking behaviour has been researched, identify health-seeking barriers or determinants across studies, and highlight emerging trends in related research. Multiple databases were used to search for published materials on this topic by Malaysian researchers, such as PubMed, Scopus, and My Jurnal. A total of 39 studies were included in this review. 29 studies utilised quantitative designs, while the remaining studies utilised mixed-method and qualitative designs. Non-communicable diseases were studied more frequently than communicable diseases. The majority of reviewed studies were conducted in Peninsular Malaysia, with very few studies focusing on the populations of Sabah and Sarawak in East Malaysia. While all of the studies highlight the multidimensional factors that influence health-seeking behaviour in the context of Malaysia, the utilisation of technology for accessing health-related information and COVID-19-related studies has been identified as an emerging trend in the literature on health-seeking behaviour in this country.

Keywords: health-seeking behaviour, Malaysia, narrative review

INTRODUCTION

Health-seeking behavior is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that has garnered significant attention in academic research worldwide. Health-seeking behavior is defined as any action or inaction undertaken by individuals who perceive themselves to have a health problem or to be ill for the purpose of finding an appropriate remedy (Olenja, 2003). It comprises the identification of health-related problems, the decision-making process for seeking health treatment, and the implementation of subsequent measures to address these issues.

Health-seeking behavior plays a vital role in determining the overall health and well-being of individuals and communities, and its significance cannot be overstated. Effective health-seeking behavior can result in the early detection and treatment of ailments, thereby preventing the progression of diseases and decreasing morbidity and mortality rates. As one of the developing countries, Malaysia's healthcare system has undergone remarkable development since its inception, combining elements of the public and private sectors to create a comprehensive and efficient healthcare framework. It has garnered significant recognition for its

ability to provide accessible, affordable, and high-quality healthcare services to its diverse population.

According to the Ministry of Health (MOH), basic health care and services are available to around 70% of the population in Sabah and Sarawak and more than 95% of the population in Peninsular Malaysia. A total of 3171 clinics and 154 hospitals were distributed throughout the country as of 2020, with mobile clinic services available in distant locations. In Malaysia's private healthcare institutions, there were 7988 registered clinics and a total of 250 licensed hospitals, maternity homes, nursing homes, and hospices, which were primarily located in urban areas (Mohd Noh et al., 2022). Additionally, the government's efforts to modernize Malaysia's healthcare system under the Sixth Malaysian Plan have resulted in the deployment of electronic health records (EHRs), which principally aim to effectively handle patient data (Salleh et al., 2021). However, sustaining an equitable and efficient system is difficult due to shifting illness patterns and demographics, an aging population, the burden of non-communicable diseases, rising health care costs, and increasing demands for better health outcomes (Tahir et al., 2014).

As new trends and changes in health-seeking behavior emerged, research on health-seeking behavior in Malaysia began to take on a new dimension in examining how these changes impacted health outcomes. Various related terms have been used in a wide range of literature, such as health care decision making, healthcare seeking, help seeking, health seeking practices, and health beliefs. But all studies are centered on the same issue, which is the responses of patients to illness. This narrative review aims not only to compile existing academic literature on health-seeking behavior to reflect the growing interest in understanding the complex and dynamic nature of health-seeking behavior among the Malaysian population, but also to address the dearth of data and gaps in studies for future works.

METHODOLOGY

All archived and published materials included in this review were obtained from three online databases, namely PubMed, Scopus, and MyJurnal. Initially, the searches were performed using combinations of specific keywords and terms such as 'health-seeking behavior in Malaysia', 'treatment-seeking in Malaysia', or 'health-seeking' and 'treatment-seeking' in Malaysia. However, the searches resulted in very limited articles relating to health-seeking behavior in Malaysia. Hence, the search was expanded by using the broad term 'health behavior or 'health seeking behavior to gather more papers. The searches used a number of keywords and Boolean combinations such as "health seeking" OR "health seeking behavior" OR "treatment seeking behavior" OR "treatment seeking" AND "Malaysia*" OR health AND seeking AND behavior OR treatment AND seeking AND behavior AND Malaysia.

These searches were limited to online materials in English and included studies conducted from 2013 until 2023. In addition to the online search, a manual search and examination of the references listed in the identified research papers were conducted. All materials obtained from the searches were screened and reviewed for potential inclusion. Inclusion criteria applied in the reviewing process comprise studies conducted in Malaysia on the Malaysian population, research related to health-seeking behavior, and papers that were published in full manuscript. Duplicates, gray literature, and unrelated studies were removed. Any disagreement on the final list of papers included in the review was discussed and resolved by consensus.

FINDINGS

The selection process for this study is represented in the flowchart depicted in Figure 1. A total of 134 articles were found using the search technique. After the first screening of citations and titles, 17 duplicates were removed. A total of 72 titles and abstracts were reviewed for potential inclusion and 9 additional references identified by manual research in the reference lists were included. As in Figure 1, a total of 39 entries successfully met the stringent requirements and have been duly incorporated into this comprehensive