LETTER TO THE EDITOR

The Cost Associated with the Supernatural Explanation of the Natural Diseases: Dual Responsibility of the Doctors

Sir,

She was a young girl of 12 years who got ill abruptly with severe headache and unstoppable vomiting. She was diagnosed with meningitis encephalitis. After few days of admission and treatment in a tertiary care hospital, patient's condition got relatively stable. She was discharged home with medication and advising regular follow-up. As the symptoms did not abate instantly, her family and relatives started thinking some alternative treatments. They turned toward Faith Healers (FHS), who told them that the girl was possessed by demons, that's why she got ill all of a sudden and not improving, while taking continuous medical treatment. They suggested some rituals to the family to get rid of evil spirits. Her parents started those suggested rituals with increasing visits to the FHSs and neglected proper follow-ups and regular medicine intake. Patient's condition got worst. After 4 months of receiving the mixed, intermittent, medical and super-medical treatment, she died.¹

 Supernatural explanations of the psychiatric disorders is well documented and has a long history.¹,² However, unnatural interpretation of the physical/organic diseases is also not very uncommon. A large number of the world's societies believe in demonic possession i.e., sorcery, ghosts/evil spirit, spirit intrusion, divine wrath, planetary/astrological influences. There is considerable evidence that same individual uses both natural and supernatural explanations to interpret the very same event and both kinds of explanations coexist in individual mind.³ Moreover, people link stronger belief in supernatural spirits with the experience of subjective spirituality.⁴ For many psychosocial and cultural reasons, belief in such spiritual forces coupled with fear is passed on from one generation to another.⁵

In Pakistan, a huge community with some cultural variation, irrespective of age, gender, sociodemographics, believe in the existence of supernatural forces such as possessions, jinns, magic and the evil eye. Most of the time, it happens that patients/caregivers associate the cause of the symptoms with the supernatural causes and sought the same line treatment. FHSs usually evoke supernatural powers in finding the causes of diseases and usually offer unorthodox therapies to their clients who present with an array of physical and psychological symptoms.⁵

This article aimed to raise the interest of the medical and scientific community to see the socio-demographic and cultural factors that hinder and/or buffer the positive outcome of the treatment. In our society, ignorance is prevalent and external environment is conducive for such paranormal explanations of a disease. Moreover, lack of proper education, non-scientific mind of the community, lack of understanding and clarification about the disease is a dominating factor that patients attract towards these unusual therapists. It is common observation that our community is very receptive to accept the supernatural explanations of a natural phenomenon. They are as receptive toward metaphysical explanations as a moth for the candle.

Therefore, doctors have the dual responsibility. They have to not only treat the illness but also educate the patients about etiology, nature of disease and the treatment outcome. Patients can be educated that diseases have the natural causes and have the natural treatment. Whereas, FHSs lack the causal explanations. Awareness campaigns, seminars and workshops, at community level have the additive effects. Scientific knowledge about the nature and etiology of diseases facilitates the treatment outcome whereas the supernatural explanations and/or magical interpretation not only adversely affect the treatment outcome but also threatens the patient's life.

REFERENCES


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