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**Objective:**

- Upon completion of the lecture, attendees should be better prepared to:
- Define the role of traditional healers in Malawi
  - Identify reasons for support and criticisms of traditional healing methods
  - Review guideline for integration of traditional healers with western medicine to best meet the needs of the population

**Abstract:**

**Introduction:** Historically, there has been a vilification of South African traditional healers by allopathic medicine providers. Some believe that these healers practice mystical incantations and use unproven herbal remedies and treatment regimens that may be harmful. Thus, the time that patients' spend with traditional healers could actually place their health in jeopardy. This stance was supported by the declaration that traditional healing was unlawful in South Africa until 1996.

Despite this ongoing skepticism, there is a growing acknowledgement of the practice and appreciation for traditional healers as well-established and trusted members of the community. In fact, the World Health Organization reported that over 80% of the world's population depends, at least in part, on traditional healers. In addition to the financial considerations in the face of abject poverty, people seek out traditional healers because of their comfort and trust stemming from shared religious and cultural experiences. The critical shortage of qualified providers has resulted in a movement encouraging understanding and partnership.

This has not, however, equated to acceptance within the biomedical community. Attempts to integrate alternative healthcare providers into western medicine have been met with resistance from both sides. "Medical Pluralism", as this union is known, is an uneven playing field. Patients seen by traditional healers continue to be ridiculed and ostracized when they subsequently seek allopathic care. The traditional healers themselves are not included in any medical care related communications.

**Methods:** A review of the literature was performed utilizing multiple search engines and the terms: traditional healer, medical pluralism, South Africa, allopathic, traditional medicine, alternative medicine. This information was incorporated into the description of a burn care medical outreach in April, 2018 to Malawi. The educational delegation consisted of a nurse practitioner, nurse educator and an occupational therapist. During this trip, the team had the unique opportunity to meet with a prominent local traditional healer, known to provide care for a significant percentage of the area's population. A specific scenario involving provision of burn care was

detailed to highlight the challenges faced by patients and providers.

**Results:** Though there was a long established history of traditional healing in Malawi, the biomedical community had never attempted to establish any relationship with its practitioners. The healers and their patients were judged harshly and frequently chastised on presentation to the local hospital. Communication and records from the healers were ignored and there was no documentation of alternative treatments. The relationship between traditional and western medicine is dominated by hostility and suspicion. A guideline for shared care was developed to better improve the exchange of information among all healthcare practitioners within the community.

**Conclusions:** As the shortage of healthcare provider's worsens and the popularity and support of traditional healers remains strong, the reality of medical pluralism dictates that the door to communication is opened. The experience on this outreach demonstrated that mistrust is a strong motivating factor to seek care on both sides of the spectrum. Delays in treatment, regardless of reason, can have devastating effects. Dialogue detailing treatment regimens and patient responses can guide future care, while providing informative feedback on successful and failed therapy. It is hoped that the guideline will result in a productive exchange of education, improved communication, and development of a partnership whose goal is to maintain and improve the health of all.

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