

Men will sooner
surrender their rights
than their customs.

— Moritz Guedemann

By Bryan E. Bledsoe, DO, FACEP, EMT-P



FOLK MEDICINE AND EMS

The Mexican-American experience

In addition to
their skills and
belongings,
immigrants also
brought to this
country their
customs and
culture.

Folk medicine in the U.S.

Since the United States was founded in the late eighteenth century, immigrants throughout the world have seen the U.S. as the land of hope and opportunity. Immigrants, by the millions, have come to this country and integrated themselves into American society. Today, we have more minority groups than virtually any country in the world. In addition to their skills and belongings, immigrants also brought to this country their customs and culture. Although we have become a "melting pot" of humankind, many cultural beliefs and practices persist—many of those related to health and illness. Folk medicine, an alternate system of health care, is still widely practiced throughout the U.S. Folk medicine actually means "medicine of the people" and is one way that a layperson deals with health and illness. At the center of most folk medicine beliefs is the ability to obtain curing or healing. Special persons were thought to possess these healing powers. This healing typically is brought about by prayer, chanting or by the

use of various herbs or similar substances. Religion, spirituality and faith play a central role. Folk medicine deals with health and illness but also satisfies many of the physical and emotional needs of the people.

Mexican-American folk medicine

Mexican-Americans immigrants are now among the fastest growing minority groups in the U.S. Nowhere is folk medicine more common than along the nearly 2,000-mile border between the U.S. and Mexico. However, the immigration from Mexico is not limited to these border states. Large cities, such as Atlanta, Denver and Chicago, all have growing Mexican-American populations. As Mexican-Americans came to this country, they brought with them many folk medicine practices. One of the largest and most widely used systems of folk medicine is called *curanderismo*.

The word *curanderismo* is derived from the verb *curar* which means "to heal." *Curanderismo* is a system of "holistic" or "folk" healing typically presided over by a *curandero* (male

healer) or *curandera* (female healer) who has *el don de Dios* (the "gift" from God to heal others). The roots of *curanderismo* can be traced back to Greek humoral medicine, which believed that three "humors" (wind, bile and phlegm) controlled organ function. It was revived during the Spanish Renaissance, found in Latin translations of Galen and Hippocrates. *Curanderismo* was also influenced by medieval and European witchcraft, early Arabic medicine and Judeo-Christian religious beliefs. These beliefs were brought to Mexico by the Spanish conquistadors. There, it blended with Mayan and Incan herbal lore and health practices. Today, *curanderismo* is a blend of all of these cultural beliefs, accompanied by many rituals and practices of modern Christianity.

There are many types of illnesses that cause people to seek help from a *curandero*. Some may be naturally-occurring, while others may be thought to be due to witchcraft (*mal puesto*). Part of the role of the *curandero* is to be an adversary for good in the struggle between good and evil. In this case, evil is Satan and those who have made secret pacts with him, namely *brujos* or *brujas* (witches). This belief is strongly supported by tenets of Catholicism that still include exorcism. Exorcism, as practiced in the Catholic church, expels demons or demonic possession through spiritual authority. Today, priests may only practice exorcism with the permission of the bishop, thus causing many believers to seek remedies from *curanderos*.

Brujos, who frequently take the form of *lechuzas* (barn owls), cats, turkeys or

coyotes, may use their evil powers to cause a multitude of problems ranging from prolonged serious illness (physical and mental) to death, or even bad luck in business and love. They use rituals, incantations, potions and powders to bring on the desired illness. The agent is sometimes placed into the victim's food or drink, or it may be a powder spread across the victim's path or placed in his house or yard. Witchcraft (*brujeria*) is particularly feared as it can even penetrate the sanctity of one's home.

When deemed appropriate, believers consult a *curandero*. The ratio of *curanderos* to population is very small and people must often travel some distance and wait several days to receive healing. The healing may consist of rituals, herbal remedies, potions or countermagic, depending upon the illness being treated. Healing often occurs in a ceremony called a *barrida* (the "sweeping") whereby eggs, lemons and various herbs, along with prayer, are often used. Typically, the egg is swept repeatedly over the victim's body while prayers are chanted. Then, the egg is usually placed in a glass under the victim's bed. In the morning, the egg may be either cooked or contain a small amount of blood indicating that the healing was successful.

Curanderismo and EMS

It is important for emergency medical service personnel to understand, recognize and respect the role of folk medicine in this population. Folk beliefs are as real an illness to the patient as a heart attack would be to the EMT. A recent survey of 405

The healing may consist of rituals, herbal remedies, potions or countermagic, depending upon the illness being treated.

Knowledge of folk medicine beliefs and practices can provide prehospital personnel with valuable information about the patient.

Hispanic patients who attended a Denver medical clinic found that 91 percent knew what a *curandero* was, while 29 percent reported that they had been to a *curandero* some time during their lives. It is important to point out that folk medicine is not necessarily limited to one socioeconomic group.

Knowledge of folk medicine beliefs and practices can provide prehospital personnel with valuable information about the patient. In addition, many folk illnesses have legitimate medical causes. Most folk remedies are harmless. However, there are some remedies that are potentially fatal. Some of the herbal preparations used to treat Mexican-American folk ailments may contain potentially toxic levels of lead. Another potential problem is that tradi-

tional medical care may be delayed while families wait for folk remedies to work. EMS personnel may be summoned to care for an ill person after it becomes apparent to the family that folk practices are not working. These patients may be seriously ill upon arrival of EMS.

Curanderismo has a wide spectrum of illnesses and conditions. One of the most common folk illnesses seen is *empacho* ("locked" intestines). This is thought to occur due to an inflammation and blockage of the intestines with undigested food. The patient with *empacho* will complain of abdominal pain, constipation, belching or bloating. The treatment offered by the *curandero* may include the administration of a tea made of various herbal substances. Some remedies (*azarcon* or *greta*) have been known to contain large quantities of lead and may prove toxic to the patient.

Another common folk illness in the Mexican-American community is *mal de ojo* (the evil eye). *Mal de ojo* can cause many symptoms and can occur accidentally by admiring a child and not touching him or her. To prevent a child from getting *mal de ojo* the person admiring the child will often go to great lengths to touch the child. If a person has *mal de ojo*, a *curandero* may be called to heal the person. A *barrida* is often employed to treat *mal de ojo*.

A common pediatric folk illness that concerns parents is *caida de la mollera* (sunken fontanelle). This is thought to occur when the nipple is pulled suddenly from the infant's mouth. This causes the soft palate to be pulled down, which in turn causes the anterior fontanelle to be drawn

Common Mexican-American folk illnesses

- aire de oido* (air in the ear) - earache, poor appetite, crying
- bilis* (excessive bile caused by too much anger) - abdominal pain, belching, vomiting
- caida de la mollera* (sunken fontanelle) - in infants, listlessness, poor suck, poor appetite
- colico* (colic) - abdominal pain (intermittent), crying, poor appetite, constipation
- empacho* ("locked" intestines or "blocked" stomach) - bloating, abdominal pain, constipation, vomiting
- mal de ojo* ("evil eye") - crying, listlessness, weakness, poor appetite
- mal puesto* (a hex or spell) - many symptoms (depending on the type of spell)
- sangre debil* (weak or tired blood) - poor appetite, weakness, listlessness, increased sleep
- susto* (fright or loss of soul) - many symptoms

down. Treatment is often initiated by the mother or grandmother and involves sucking vigorously on the anterior fontanelle. This treatment may result in bruising on the head and may be mistakenly interpreted as a sign of child abuse. If a *curandero* is summoned he may push up on the soft palate during a healing ceremony, effectively curing the illness. An alternate treatment is to turn the baby upside down for approximately one minute and then tap the baby's feet three times. This reportedly will elevate the fontanelle to its normal position. The sunken anterior fontanelle seen with *caida de la mollera* may actually be a symptom of dehydration. EMS personnel should look for other symptoms of dehydration including tachycardia, dry mucous membranes and decreased urine production.

Another condition is *aire de oido* (air in the ear). This is believed to occur when a person, especially a child, is exposed to cold air or a strong wind. Air enters the ear and causes the condition. The patient will complain of earache, altered hearing and headache. The folk treatment for *aire de oido* is to roll a piece of paper into a cone, place the small end of the cone into the ear canal, and light the large end with a match. The flame will create a vacuum that will evacuate the offending air from the ear. *Aire de oido* may be mistaken for a legitimate ear infection (otitis media), which could require antibiotics.

In addition to the "illnesses" described above, many signs and symptoms of traditional illnesses cause increased concern in many members of the Mexican-American population. Fever (*calentura* or *fiebre*) is worrisome.

Many see fever as a disease in and of itself and not as a symptom of much broader process such as infection. Also, increased sputum (*flema*) is a cause for concern and may also be thought to be an illness in itself. This belief can be traced back to one the three "humors" of Greek medicine.

Summary

EMS personnel may often hear complaints that, on the surface, appear trivial. The presence of a fever in a young child may be a real emergency in the mind of the mother. Although the child may have other symptoms, such as diarrhea, fever is the symptom that she will be most concerned. Respect this concern. Do not ever be condescending. When assessing a patient, always consider the possible belief in folk medicine. This is especially true if the history or chief complaint detects any of the folk concerns described above. Folk medicine is certainly not practiced by all Mexican-Americans. However, to those who do believe, it is as real as any traditional medical illness.

Folk medicine is not practiced by all Mexican-Americans, but to those who do believe, it is as real as any traditional medical illness.

Bibliography

1. Mangos, JA, "Folk Medicine in Texas," *Texas Medicine*, 1986, 82(10): p.5.
2. Hentges, K; Shields, CE, and Cantu, C, "Folk medicine and medical practice," *Texas Medicine*, 1986, 82(10): p. 27-29
3. Ripley, GD, "Mexican-American folk remedies: their place in health care," *Texas Medicine*, 1986, 82(11): p. 41-44
4. Leads from the MMWR, "Lead poisoning from Mexican folk remedies-California," *JAMA* 1993, 250(23): p. 3149
5. Marsh, WW and Eberle, M, "Curanderismo associated with fatal outcome in a child with leukemia," *Texas Medicine*, 1987, 83(2): p. 38-40
6. Padilla, R; Gomez, V; Biggerstaff, SL; Mehler, PS, "Use of curanderismo in a public health care system," *Arch Intern Med*, 2001, 28;161(10): p. 1336-40
7. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 1994, Citta del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana; 1673:445
8. Curanderismo: The Handbook of Texas Online. [<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/CC/sdc1.html>]