

## Haitian Health Care Beliefs and Voodoo (Voudou)

### **Concept of Health**

Haitians have a very strong belief in God's power and His ability to heal. They believe God works through various media, including dreams and both traditional and medical means.

Haitians consider health to be a personal responsibility and self-treat as a way to promote health or prevent disease. Home remedies are typically used first before seeking help, and may include herbal preparations, massage, or over the counter medications. Haitians only seek medical care when it becomes clear that an illness requires attention. Clinician should ask about what home remedies and herbal treatments the patient has tried. Haitians may take herbal and prescribed medicines concurrently

Haitians often use vague terms, it may help to ask, "what do you or your family think you have?" Patients may tell clinician what illness he/she has rather than describe symptoms, and seek confirmation of self-diagnosis. Patient may gauge his/her symptoms and institute treatment based on another Haitian's experience with the same illness. Sometimes use biomedical terms inappropriately.

Compliance with a course of treatment depends on the perceived severity of the illness. Some illnesses are in themselves severe (cancer, diabetes), while others are perceived to be severe because someone else has died from the disease. The clinician can also tell the patient the condition is serious. The higher the perceived illness severity; the higher the degree of compliance.

Since pregnancy is not an illness, some Haitians may not see the importance of prenatal care.

Haitian believe birth control is inappropriate and undesirable; consider children to be a blessing from God. Do not recognize male's responsibility in preventing conception. Males believe that condoms reduce sexual pleasure. They are very sensitive to discussion about sexually transmitted infection (STI).

### **Causes of/attitudes about physical illness**

- Haitians have a fatalistic view of illness, reflected in the expression, "God is good" (Bondye Bon) Whatever happens in God's will. Perceive illness as punishment, an assault on the body that may have natural or supernatural etiologies.
- Natural illness, known as "disease of the Lord" (maladi Bondye), is of short duration. It occurs frequently and is caused by such environmental factors as food, air, cold, heat, and gas. Other causes of natural illness are "hot/cold" imbalance.
- Supernatural illness is very serious; Haitians attribute it to the anger of spirits (loa). Voodoo priest must find out what the spirit advises for a cure. A sezisman occurs when bad news or a frightful situation disrupts normal blood flow and makes blood move to the head, causing partial loss of vision, headache, increased blood pressure, and/or stroke.

### **Causes and attitudes mental illness**

- Highly stigmatized and shameful for the family. Topic is taboo. Haitians typically believe that mental illness has supernatural causes, such as a hex or punishment for not honoring protective spirits with feasts. Accept treatment and hospitalization only in cases of severe mental problems.

### **Causes of defects**

- An angry spirit, perhaps enlisted by an enemy, causes physical deformity. Persons with genetic defects viewed as a curse on the family. Typically receive care at home and sometimes are hidden.

## **Symptom Management**

### 1. Pain (doule)

Haitian have a low pain threshold and are verbal about what hurts. They are usually vague about location of pain, believing that whole body is affected; because disease travels, location of pain not important. Most prefer injections, in lieu of injections; order of preference is elixir, tablets, and capsules. They also accept alternative pain treatments.

### 2. Dyspnea

A primary respiratory ailment is "oppression". Haitians use this term to describe asthma, a state of anxiety and hyperventilation. Consider oppression like any respiratory condition. Patient says, "I am suffocating" (M ap toufe) or "I cannot breathe" (Mwen-pa ka respire). Offer oxygen only when absolutely necessary, as Haitians associate it with serious disease

### 3. Constipation/diarrhea

Constipation: Treat with laxative or some herbal teas, sometimes use enemas

Diarrhea: Diarrhea is not a major concern among adults. However, Haitians consider diarrhea to be very dangerous in children and sometimes interpret it as a hex on the child. They try herbal medicine, seek help from a voodoo priest, and, if all else fails, may seek a physician. It is very important for clinicians to assess child carefully because he/she may have been ill for some time.

### 4. Fatigue

Haitians think fatigue signals a physical weakness known as febles, caused by anemia or insufficient blood. Generally attribute symptoms to poor diet. Patients may suggest a need for special care—i.e., eating well, taking vitamins, and resting.

### 5. Depression (sometimes depression nerveuse):

Stigma attached to mental illness is so strong that Haitians do not readily admit to depression. According to voodoo, depression indicates possession by malevolent spirits or is punishment for not honoring good, protective spirits. Also may view depression as a hex put on someone by a jealous or envious person. Clinicians need to be sensitive to root cause of problem and ascertain need for comfort within particular religious beliefs

## **Voodoo (Voodoo)**

Voodoo is a system of spirit worship brought to Haiti by slaves from Africa. In 1791, leaders of a slave revolt against France held a secret voodoo meeting in a mountain above Cap Haitien at which they dedicated their country to evil spirits. After their victory over Napoleon's armies in 1804, they attributed their success to voodoo. As recently as 2004, then President Aristide, a former Roman Catholic priest, renewed this vow. People who practice voodoo believe that everything, good or bad, happens at the whim of spirits. Illnesses are thought to have either natural or supernatural causes; for example, if the spirits are angry with you they can make you sick. Since a majority of Haitians practice voodoo to some extent, it plays a significant part in the health care orientation of the population. North American health care providers need to consider Voodoo beliefs and practices when treating Haitian patients.

How to respond to patients with voodoo beliefs

- Provide medical education on the reason for a medical illness an appropriate educational level
- Provide spiritual education (for team members that are Christians)

### **Voodoo Practices and Beliefs**

- Gas or gaz also is notable to Haitians. It can cause pain, anemia, colic, headaches, rheumatism, back pain, shoulder pain, and problems for women who have just given birth and their infants. It can enter the body in a variety of ways and can usually be relieved by the administration of certain foods and teas.
- Perdition is a word used by many patients to explain that they are pregnant for a long time period, up to 6 years; they believe that the devil can hold the baby inside of them. Some may believe it is natural cause of some diseases.
- Some patients come to the clinic with a lemon behind a belt on the abdomen of the baby or adult to stop sickness from devil.
- They may put teeth of dead people or dog around the neck in a necklace to protect the baby or the adult, to stop vomiting. They also put door key in the necklace to stop vomiting.
- Some patients come with a knot in their toes to stop diarrhea. During cholera epidemic, dead people were found with knot in their toes, they refused to go to hospital because they thought they could be healed or stop diarrhea using that devil process. Many people think it's just a social practice or beliefs.
- They complain that Filariasis is a devil attack, and they think that they can be healed using voodoo ceremonies, so they don't go and get medical care all the time.