

TREAT WITH CARE

When illness strikes, some people seek treatment from traditional healers, sometimes with grave consequences, writes **Nadia Badarudin**

I REMEMBER interviewing a breast cancer survivor once and 60-year-old Maznah Mansor (not her real name) admitted, almost sheepishly, that she had gone to a bomoh for treatment.

Maznah is well-educated, financially well-to-do and a high-ranking officer in the government service. With such a background, one would assume that she would go for modern medical treatment.

However, she went to a bomoh (a Malay shaman), hoping for a miracle.

When she finally realised that the bomoh's "healing treatment" did nothing, her cancer had already advanced to stage four.

There are many tragic stories similar to Maznah's. People, regardless of race, religion or educational background, go to traditional healers to treat ailments ranging from skin rashes and a broken leg to life-threatening conditions like cancer.

When it comes to mental disorders, many are likely to turn to the bomoh to ward off what they believe is a bad omen or a condition caused by evil spirits.

Nevermind the unimaginable rituals taking place in spooky, dimly-lit rooms or the use of unknown herbs or even bones as required by the healer. Some people go to great lengths, expecting a miracle.

SHAPED BY BELIEFS

Experts believe that the influence of traditional healing is shaped by a society's belief systems.

Perception and misunderstanding about a particular illness also influences a person's decision to walk away from

modern medicine.

In his 1993 article titled *A Glimpse Into Traditional Outlook Towards Health: A Literature Review*, Samir Al-Adawi wrote that "therapeutic techniques congruent with the local beliefs and traditions are reasons for seeking traditional healers".

In a 2000 research paper on mental health and traditional healing in Indonesia, R. Salan and T. Maretzki said traditional healers give patients a "sense of hope", as they are able to view illness from the patients' cultural perspectives.

HEALERS CONFORM

In a presentation on *Schizophrenia and Traditional/Spiritual Healer: Breaking The Barrier*, Dr Hazli Zakaria from the Department of Psychiatry, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, says reliance on traditional healers is high when it comes to treating mental disorders like schizophrenia.

"The causes of mental disorders pointed out by traditional healers such as black magic or disturbance from evil spirits are easily understood and accepted by patients and their families.

"This explains why their reliance on the shaman is high," he says.

A local 2010 study pointed out that among the patients seeking psychiatric services at Hospital Kuala Lumpur, 54 per cent had at least one contact with a traditional healer prior to psychiatric consultation, says Dr Hazli.

"In most new cases, patients had consulted the bomoh first, thinking they were victims of black magic.

"When we're sick, we're desperate to

find the cure or an assurance that things can be solved. Healers usually tell the patients and their family members what they want to hear and conform to their beliefs," he says.

TEDIOUS DIAGNOSIS

Dr Toh Chin Lee, senior consultant psychiatrist and head of Psychiatry And Mental Health at Hospital Selayang says the nature of diagnosis or long treatment period have discouraged patients to consult doctors.

"In treating a schizophrenic, for example, the diagnosis is not as easy as treating other medical conditions like diabetes.

"It cannot be diagnosed at only one sitting. It takes time and some patients may not have the patience to wait. They look for alternatives that can provide an instant solution to their ailments," he says.

CO-EXISTING

Dr Toh says a pilot project is being carried out in Pahang where medical practitioners work together with traditional healers for detection of early psychosis, supporting the notion that both worlds can co-exist to benefit patients seeking treatment.

There are so many possibilities to cure or recover from an illness. There is no wrong in seeking alternative treatments in addition to modern medicine.

However, let's not forget the story of Maznah and other people we know whose illnesses progress due to their delay to get the right medical treatment.

✉ nadia_badarudin@nst.com.my