

Title: Embodied Authority: Medical Choice and Decision Making in San Ignacio, Belize

Primary Researcher: Kathryn Smiley, Northwestern University

Study Advisor: Rebecca Seligman, PhD, Northwestern University

Abstract: Any casual observer of Belize will easily note the presence of multiple medical paradigms, mainly Mayan medicine and biomedicine. The holistic, ethnobotanical philosophy of Mayan medicine draws a sharp contrast with biomedicine, which is the paradigm used by the medical establishment in Belize. As the second largest urban area in Belize, residents of San Ignacio have no issue accessing Western medicine. Medical authority in San Ignacio lies neither within the biomedical establishment nor the traditional healers, but instead rested within individual's personal knowledge and sense of health. People in Belize use their embodied understanding of health to guide their medical decision making, simultaneously choosing to reject the standard practice of both Mayan and Western medicine. Self-diagnosis and home remedies are extremely common, not because people do not have access to other forms of treatment, but because people trust their own embodied knowledge of health more than any outside authority. Through an analysis of original ethnographic research with twenty participants, this study demonstrates that knowledge of traditional medicine and alternative forms of treatment are increasing in San, Ignacio. In fact, anti-globalization sentiment and a general distrust of Western profit-driven systems are fueling the search for other solutions.