For Many Immigrants, a Health Care System Underground

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Body

When investigators last week shuttered a large, unlicensed medical clinic in Flushing that they said offered Chinese and Western remedies, they provided a glance behind a curtain that shrouds an expansive ***underground health care system*** serving hundreds of thousands of the city's ***immigrants***.

While the clinic, the New York Beijing Hospital of Traditional Chinese Medicine, may have been more brazen than other centers -- it advertised in a local Chinese paper and ran a Web site promising ***care*** for a variety of ills -- it is only one of perhaps thousands of clinics, herbalists, spiritual centers and makeshift medical offices where ***many*** of the city's ***immigrants*** go for medical ***care***.

Stymied by a lack of ***health*** insurance, fearful of the medical centers' potential connections to immigration authorities and longing for familiar remedies dispensed by someone who speaks their language, ***many*** of the city's ***immigrants*** have been driven to create their own complex methods of getting ***health care***.

The landscape of their alternative medical sources is as vast and textured as the city's ***immigrant*** population, comprising herbal healers used by ***many*** people from the Caribbean and South and Central America, voodoo priests frequented by some Haitians, pharmacists who double as internists and doctors, from regions ranging from Russia to India to Poland, who lack an American license but set up shop offering some form of ***care*** to those who seek them.

"There is a whole unregulated sector of medicine at work in New York," said Dr. Francesca M. Gany, the executive director of the New York Task Force on ***Immigrant Health***.

About 65 percent of the hundreds of ***immigrants*** in Queens who responded to a survey said they used an alternative source of ***care*** in addition to or instead of the city's larger ***health care system***, Dr. Gany said. She added that she believed the same held true for the city's broader ***immigrant*** population.

And the treatments doled out by these centers vary: herbal remedies used to treat stomach aches and cradle cap; exorcisms for patients with chronic stomach pain; amulets attached to babies to ward off evil spirits and antibiotics that are dubiously obtained and unwisely administered.

Most often, patients who are new ***immigrants*** mingle in two medical worlds, the city's vast array of hospitals and clinics, and a second sphere, where folk remedies are obtained. A few avoid the American medical ***system*** entirely,

believing they cannot afford it or fearing the doctors, and rely totally on other healers. Others get no ***health care*** at all, relying on home remedies until they become terribly ill and end up in a hospital emergency room.

Maria Sambrano, an ***immigrant*** from Honduras, said she inhabited both worlds, depending on her needs. "I think some plants work better than medicine," said Ms. Sambrano, who was waiting to meet with a spiritualist at Botanica Santa Barbara in Washington Heights last week.

While ***many*** doctors say some folk treatments like herbs are harmless or even beneficial, ***health care*** experts are concerned that vast swaths of ***immigrant*** groups lack access to conventional ***health care***, and that more centers like the one in Queens may be offering wholly unregulated medicine that they are ill-equipped to provide.

And patients may end up paying more for some ***care*** than they could be getting at city clinics that charge on a sliding scale based on income.

"In the minds of our patients, alternative medicine is the standard of ***care*** and what we do is alternative medicine," said Dr. Guillermo Santos, the medical director of Betances ***Health*** Unit, a community ***health*** center on the Lower East Side.

"This poses two problems," Dr. Santos said. "People may have serious illnesses they may be trying to cure at home. Or they don't tell providers what they are using out of fear." The center's doctors try to stay current on the herbs that patients tend to use, and have worked with neighborhood shamans, showing them how to spot the basic symptoms of diseases like tuberculosis.

Some alternative centers clearly operate outside the law. Law enforcement officials said the New York Beijing Hospital gave thousands of patients, mostly Chinese, treatments they were not authorized to offer. And pharmacies that hand out drugs without a prescription are illegal.

Certain practices are as dangerous as they are unlawful. Investigators for the Queens district attorney were tipped off to the center in Flushing when a patient sued, charging that she became infected after workers there removed an intrauterine device, according to court filings. Investigators say they were looking into a similar clinic in the neighborhood.

Dr. Jackson Kuan, the assistant director of gastroenterology at Flushing Hospital, said he occasionally saw patients who had misused herbs on the advice of alternative healers. He said he recently saw a Korean patient who had been given an herbal concoction that led to fatal liver failure.

And ***health care*** workers have been alarmed in recent years by the increased use of mercury among Caribbean residents, especially in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn.

Illegal centers usually operate far below the radar screen of law enforcement, advertising mostly by word of mouth or through subtle marketing in the language of their intended customers, an increasingly diverse group.

"It is hard just to become aware of the various services that are being provided," said Wayne M. Osten, director of the State Department of ***Health***'s Office of ***Health System*** Management. Mr. Osten said the department closes 20 to 25 unlicensed medical centers a year. "We are looking to hire staff with those skills to better police it, because as you get more and more communities it does become a tougher problem to monitor."

Yet ***many*** healers operate legally, if on the fringes. For instance, according to Dr. Gany and other experts, some of the centers serve as entrees to the larger medical world, where new ***immigrants*** are directed to clinics and hospitals and assured that immigration officials will not be notified if the ***immigrants*** are patients.

Further, understanding how ***immigrants*** use alternative centers helps doctors better treat patients who do not share their language and culture. "I don't think these places are necessarily an impediment to ***care***," said Dr. Mary McCord, a pediatrician in Washington Heights who had an intern conduct a study of her patients' herbal use.

"If we can get people to tell us what they are doing, we can negotiate, because people do make choices," Dr. McCord added. "They might say, 'I have asthma but I have heard bad things about those medicines so let me try honey and onions.' So maybe we can get them to use honey and onions and something else. One skill in being a doctor is to accept where people are coming from and to be willing to negotiate according to their beliefs."

The folk healers range greatly from group to group, neighborhood to neighborhood, with much overlap. Hispanics, Russians and people in the Caribbean alike use herbal medicine, although often in different preparations. Russians, according to ***health care*** workers, lean more toward vitamins. Shamans have different functions, sometimes performing voodoo ceremonies for Caribbean clients, or doing what they say is healing work with their hands.

The Chinese gravitate toward herbal treatments and acupuncture, as do some Koreans. Southeast Asians often practice yoga and use medicines from their countries.

Each nation offers its own folk remedies, herbs and medical concoctions -- rose water for nerves; shark oil for various flu symptoms; cordial de monell, a sedative mixed with oil, for teething; and anise for nausea, to name just a few. These treatments are most often purchased at botanicas, stores that specialize in herbal medicines, oils and religious wares. At Botanica Santa Barbara, one can find fresh rosemary, dozens of ointments, creams and oils to keep away evil spirits, ignite romance or invite prosperity.

Lisa Garcia, a card reader, helps customers with personal problems and says she removes pain with her hands.

"Sometimes people go to the doctor and when it doesn't work, come here," said Antonio Mora, the store's owner.

But while ***many immigrants*** prefer ***many*** folk or home remedies to conventional medicine, far too ***many*** are shut out of the ***health care system*** because they lack insurance or are unaware of what is available to them cheaply, experts said. About 40 percent of legal ***immigrants*** are uninsured, said David Sandman, a program officer at the Commonwealth Fund, a private philanthropic organization in New York. Among illegal ***immigrants***, the number is far higher, he said.

Federal welfare reforms contributed to the number of uninsured by making even legal ***immigrants*** who arrived after August 1996 ineligible for Medicaid for five years. But New York also has several ***systems*** in place to insure ***many immigrants***, even those lacking documentation. There is a Medicaid program available to all ***immigrants*** for emergencies, a state-financed program for pregnant women regardless of their status and a state insurance program for children of illegal ***immigrants***.

However, ***many immigrants*** have no idea about these services, and are cut off from any pipeline to them. Others are fearful that if they use them, ***health care*** workers will tip off immigration officials. And some groups shun public assistance as a shameful handout they would rather live without.

And then there is the intense distrust ***many immigrants*** feel toward the medical establishment. Dr. McCord said that ***many*** of her Dominican patients had negative notions about asthma medicine. Dr. Santos said ***many*** Jamaican patients shunned hypertension medicine, preferring herbs. And some Asians are afraid to have blood drawn because they think it will only weaken them, said Dinah Surh, the administrator of Sunset Park Family ***Health*** Center in Brooklyn.

Her center, with its diverse staff, has gone to great pains to attract ***many immigrant*** groups. It set up a mosque for Muslim patients to pray in. It offers acupuncture -- now used by patients around the world -- as one way of attracting Chinese patients.

The center went for other touches, Ms. Surh said. "We wanted to have a fish tank. Some Chinese groups said we need gold-colored fish for good luck so we added those. But the tank is right below a skylight, and they told us the good luck would go out of the skylight. So we put a shade there."

Many doctors said that thousands of years of herbal medicine are nothing to sneeze at, and pointed to a highly increased interest among American patients in Eastern techniques like yoga and acupuncture. Indeed ***many*** large hospitals have adopted these types of practices in recent years.

And conventional doctors have a few tips to learn from folk and traditional healers, some experts concurred, like advertising in various languages and getting the word out through community groups. But still, ***many***, ***many immigrants*** will always rely on a mix of services.

"I use conventional medicine," said Ray Gongora, who immigrated from Cuba in the 1960's and often turns to herbs. "But emotionally I don't get what I need. They give you a blood test and send you on your way, but if you're not prepared mentally, you get depressed."

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Graphic

Photos: William Bobe, who says he has the ability to heal both physical and spiritual ills, shopped for herbs in Washington Heights last week at a botanica that stocks ***many*** alternative medicines, left. (Photographs by Ruth Fremson/The New York Times)(pg. 38)

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