

Perceptions, Health-Seeking Behaviour and Traditional Treatment of Common Childhood Illnesses in Yemen: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Background: Although under-five mortality rates are declining globally, they remain high in developing countries, including Yemen. Deeply ingrained local perceptions and beliefs among caregivers regarding childhood illnesses are believed to influence how they diagnose and respond to these illnesses, contributing to high mortality rates.

Objectives: This study aimed to explore perceptions, health-seeking behaviours (HSB), and traditional medicine (TM) approaches for childhood illnesses in Al-Mukalla, Yemen.

Methods: A qualitative study was conducted that included three focus group discussion (FGDs) with caregivers, five semi-structured interviews (SSIs), as well as observations with traditional healers (TH). Participants were selected purposively. A total of 21 caregivers were included, each with at least one child under the age of five, who used TM or home remedies for their children during periods of illness, and who came from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

Results: Through FGDs and SSI, participants used the term “childhood illness” to describe any deviation from the ideal child state (“healthy child”) and considered it a normal part of child development. They also identified multiple causes for illness, combining medical and non-medical aspects. Some illnesses were categorized as “medically incurable” (such as those resulting from accidental falls, teething, or magic and the evil eye) and were believed to respond only to TM. This was the most common reason for delaying HSB. Common TM options in the study area included herbs, massage, cauterization, and Quranic healing.

Conclusion: The study underscores the need to raise awareness of caregivers in Al-Mukalla about the potential risks and complications associated with TM practices, particularly concerning the health of their children. TH are likely to play a role in treating childhood illnesses. Therefore, healthcare professionals should collaborate closely with them, given their significant influence. By providing them with accurate information, they can become agents of positive change in the community.

Keywords: Perceptions, HSB, TM, childhood illnesses, caregivers, TH, Yemen.