

# FolkMedicine: Implications For EMS

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## 1 Credit Hour Course Approved for the Following Levels:

- » First Responder
- » EMT Basic
- » EMT Intermediate
- » EMT Paramedic

## Objectives

At the end of this lecture, you should be able to:

1. Define Folk Medicine
2. Name some of the most commonly practiced types of folk medicine in the United States
3. Describe the characteristics of the following types of folk medicine
  - a. Curanderismo
  - b. Vodoun (Voodoo)
  - c. Native American Medicine
  - d. Oriental folk medicine
  - e. Southern folk medicine

*“Men will sooner give up their rights than their customs.” - Moritz Guedemann*

*“To know a People, you must first know their culture.” - Chief Seattle*

Folk medicine is an alternative, and sometimes complimentary, system of health care that is widely practiced throughout North America.

The term “folk medicine” literally means *“medicine of the people.”*

## Types of Folk Medicine:

- Curanderismo
- Vodoun (Voodoo)
- Native American Medicine
- Oriental Folk Medicine
- Southern Folk Medicine

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## Curanderismo

- Curanderismo originated in Mexico then came to the United States with Hispanic immigration.
- Curanderismo is derived from the Spanish verb curar which means “to heal.”
- It is a system of “holistic” or “folk” healing typically presided over by a curandero or curandera.
- The curandera is one who has el don de Dios (the “gift” from God to heal others).
- One of the most famous curanderos was “El Niño” Fidencio, who lived in Mexico at the start of the twentieth century, and whose spirit still guides many modern curanderos.
- The roots of curanderismo can be traced back to Greek humoral medicine.
- Three humors were believed to control organ function:
  - Kappa (phlegm)
  - Pitta (bile)
  - Vata (wind)
- They were revived during the Spanish Renaissance by consulting Latin translations of Galen and Hippocrates.
- Curanderismo was also influenced by medieval and European witchcraft, early Arabic medicine, and Judeo-Christian religious beliefs.
- These beliefs were brought to Mexico by the Spanish conquistadors.
- In Mexico, these beliefs were blended with Mayan and Incan herbal lore and health practices.
- Today, curanderismo is a blend of all these cultural beliefs, accompanied by many rituals and practices of modern Christianity.
- Many types of illnesses cause people to seek help from a curandero:
  - Diseases that are naturally-occurring (mal natural).
  - Diseases due to witchcraft (mal puesto).
- Part of the role of the curandero is to be an advocate for good in the struggle between good and evil.
- Evils includes those who have made pacts with Satan, namely brujos and brujas.
- This belief is supported by tenets of Catholicism that still include exorcism.
  - Exorcism is a sacramental of the Catholic church that expulses demons or demonic possession through spiritual authority.
  - Exorcism can only be performed by a Priest with express permission of the Bishop.

As many found difficulty getting a Priest to perform an exorcism, they turned to a curandero for help.

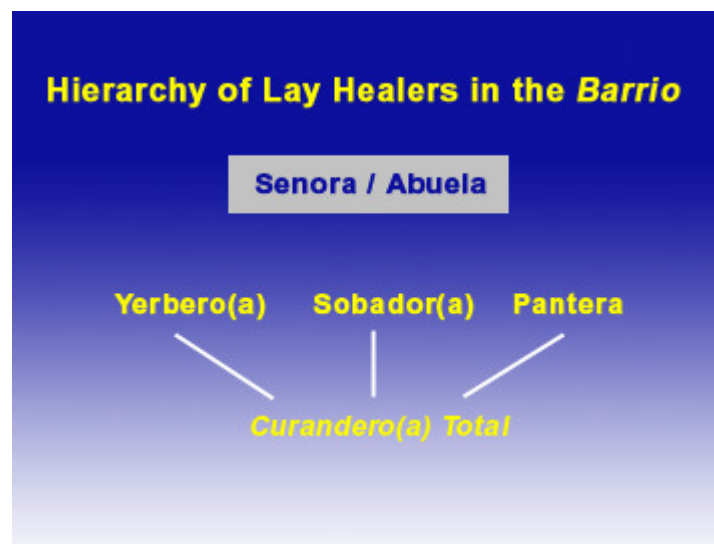
Brujos often take the form of lechuzas (barn owls), gatos (cats), guajalotes (turkeys), or coyotes (coyotes).

- Brujas may use their evil powers to cause numerous problems ranging from prolonged serious illness (mental and emotional) to death.
- Brujas can cause bad luck in business and love.
- Brujos use rituals, incantations, potions, and powders to bring on the desired illness.
- The agent is sometimes placed in the victim's food or drink, or may be a powder spread across the victim's path.
- Brujeria (witchcraft) is particularly feared as it can penetrate the sanctity of one's home.

When deemed appropriate, believers consult a curandero.

The ratio of curanderos to population is very small and people must often travel some distance and wait several days for healing.

- Healing often occurs during a ritual called a barrida.
- Eggs, lemons, and various herbs, along with prayer, are often used.
  - The egg is swept repeatedly over the victim's body while prayers are chanted
  - The egg is placed in a glass near the victim's bed.
  - In the morning, the egg may be either curdled or contain a small amount of blood indicating that the healing was successful.
- Because of its prevalence, particularly in communities with large Hispanic populations, EMS providers must be familiar with some of the illnesses and treatments.



A recent survey of 405 Hispanic patients attending a Denver medical clinic found:

- 90% knew what a curandero was.
- 29% had been to a curandero some times during their life.
- Many folk illnesses have a legitimate medical cause.
- Most folk remedies are harmless, but a few can be toxic.
- Legitimate medical care may be delayed while waiting for remedies to work.

### Illnesses seen in curanderismo:

- *empacho*
- *mal de ojo*
- *caída de la mollera*
- *aire de oído*
- *mal puesto*
- *cólico*
- *susto*
- *bilis*

#### *empacho*

- “Locked” intestines.
- Thought to result from inflammation and blockage of the intestines from undigested food.
- Symptoms: Abdominal pain, bloating, constipation and belching. Virtually any abdominal complaint can be attributed to empacho.

#### *empacho*

- Treatment includes administration of a tea made of various herbal substances.
- Some remedies (azarcon or greta) can contain large quantities of lead.

#### *mal de ojo*

- The “evil eye.”
- Caused by admiring a child and not touching them.
- Symptoms: Include sudden onset of high fever, vomiting, headache, coryza, fainting, and sometimes convulsions.

### ***mal de ojo***

#### **Treatment:**

1. A fresh egg is passed over the patient's body.
2. It is then broken into a bowl of water and covered by a cross of palm or straw, and put under the head of the patient's bed.
3. The patient is then put to bed for the night and in the morning the egg is examined. If it is curdled (or contains flecks of blood), then that indicates that the ojo is cured and the egg disposed of.

### ***caída de la mollera***

- A "sunken" fontanel.
- Caused by pulling the nipple away from an infant's mouth, causing the anterior fontanel to be pulled down.
- Symptoms: Listlessness, poor feeding, sunken fontanel.

### ***caída de la mollera***

#### **Treatment:**

- Sucking on the fontanel.
- Turn the baby upside down for 1 minute and tap the feet 3 times.
- Placing an egg or poultice on the sunken fontanel.
- Pulling on the hair to raise the fontanel.
- A curandero may push up on the soft palate during a ceremony "healing" the infant.

### ***aire de oído***

- Air in the ear.
- Caused when a person, especially a child, is exposed to cold air or a strong wind.
- Symptoms: Earache, altered hearing, headache.
- Treatment: Roll a piece of paper into a cone, place the narrow end in the ear, and light the outer part of the cone.

### ***mal puesto***

- Caused when someone (usually a brujo) places a spell or hex on the person.
- Symptoms: Numerous, physical, emotional, spiritual, financial, marital, sexual.
- Treatment: Seek treatment from a curandero. Usually herbs, chants, prayers, counter-spells or hexes, and similar actions to remove or counter the original curse.

### ***cólico***

- “Colic.”
- Most common in infants, but can be seen in all ages.
- Symptoms: abdominal pain (intermittent), crying, poor appetite, constipation.
- Treatment: Mild preparation of chamomile

### ***susto***

- “Fright sickness.”
- Caused by exposure to a frightening event and results in loss of the soul from the body.
- Espanto is a more severe and potentially fatal form.
- Symptoms: nervousness, anorexia, insomnia, listlessness, despondency, involuntary muscle tics, and diarrhea.

### ***susto***

- Treatment: orange blossom tea, marijuana, Brazil wood, or a barrida.
- During the barrida the patient recounts the details of the frightening event then lays down on the floor on the axis of a crucifix. The patient’s body is then swept with fresh herbs, such as basil, purple sage, rosemary, or rue; an egg may also be used.
- During prayers, the curandero exerts the frightened soul to return to the body.

### ***bilis***

- Literally “bile” or “gall.”
- It is felt to be suppressed anger souring one’s disposition.
- Treatment: It is a “hot illness” that is treated with a psychotherapeutic approach of encouraging the expression of one’s emotions and the drinking of teas of bitter herbs such as estafiate, or warm water.

### ***Other Illnesses:***

- fiebre or calintura (fever)
- flema (increased sputum)
- sereno (night dew)
- chimplé (child’s behavior problems)
- frío de la matriz (coldness of the womb)

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## Vodoun

- Vodoun is a religion practiced in parts of west Africa, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and certain areas of the US where Haitians have settled.
- Voodoo comes from the west African word vodun meaning spirit.
- Vodoun came from west Africa with roots that go back 10,000 years.
- Slaves brought their religion with them when shipped to Haiti and other islands in the West Indies.
- Slaves were baptized into the Roman Catholic Church upon their arrival.
- There was little to support Christianity so slaves returned (often secretly) to their native faith.
- Vodoun is a religion of many traditions.
- The supreme deity is Bon Dieu.
- Each group follows a different spiritual path and worships a different pantheon of spirits called Loa.
  - The Loa control nature, health, wealth, and happiness of mortals.
  - During voodoo ceremonies these Loa can possess the bodies of the ceremony participants.
  - When possessed, the faithful turn into the Loa who then relay advice, warning, and desires.
- Music and dance are key elements in voodoo ceremonies.
- Voodoo is a practical religion, playing an important role in the family and the community.
- The priest (houngan) or (mambo), through divine aid, offer help and healing through the use of herbs and medicines or through faith alone.
- Voodoo teaches a respect for the natural world.
- It is now practiced by more than half of Haitians.
- The public's perception of voodoo often points to the evil side.
- Voodoo spells are mainly healing spells, nature spells, love spells, purification spells, and joyous celebration.
- Much of the negative image of voodoo is driven by Hollywood, however, some practitioners of voodoo have turned to the "dark side."
  
- Although rare, the practice of zombification has been fairly well documented in Haiti.
- In many areas of Haiti, zombies are an accepted part of life.
  - Zombies are the "living dead."
  - They are innocent victims raised, in a comatose trance, from their graves by evil Vodoun priests (bokors). They are often forced to toil as slaves
  
- Nagrete Joseph, age 60, was reportedly killed over a land dispute in 1968. In 1979, she was recognized wandering around her home village by the police officer who, 13 years before, had pronounced her dead. A younger woman, Francina, was supposedly buried in 1976. In 1979, she was found in a catatonic state by a girlfriend. A jealous husband was said to be responsible for her demise. Her mother recognized her by a scar on her temple. When they opened her grave, it was filled with rocks.

- In early May, 1962, Louis Ozias entered the Albert Schweitzer Hospital (an American-directed philanthropic institution). He had been sick with fever, body aches and general malaise for some time, but had recently begun to spit up blood.. His condition deteriorated and, on May 3, he was pronounced dead by 2 attending physicians (one of whom was an American). His medical record showed that, at his death, he suffered from digestive disorders, pulmonary edema, hypothermia, respiratory difficulties and hypotension. His sister was present at his bedside and verified the death by placing her thumbprint on the death certificate. The body was placed in a cold room for 8 hours and then taken for burial. At 1000 hours on May 3 (8 hours after death) he was buried in a small cemetery north of the village of Morbien. A heavy concrete slab was placed over his grave by family members.
- In 1981, a man walked into the Morbien market place and approached his sister, introducing himself by his boyhood name. He claimed to be Ozias and reported that he had been made a zombie by his own brother. With many other zombies, he worked on a northern sugar plantation until the death of their master freed them. He wandered about the country for 18 years fearful of the vengeful brother.
- The case of Louis Ozias generated much publicity in Haiti.
- The Director of the Port-au-Prince Psychiatric Institute developed a series of questions concerning Ozias' childhood that only he could know. He correctly answered the questions. Over 200 village members who known Ozias were convinced that he had returned.

Fingerprint analysis by Scotland Yard revealed that the death certificate was authentic. There was no apparent social or economic incentive to perpetuate a fraud.

Ozias reported that a bokor used a potion to make him into a zombie.

Physicians familiar with the case felt that the signs and symptoms he had before his death were consistent with poisoning.

Study of the poisons used in the area found they were made of:

- Local plants
- Local amphibians
- Local reptiles
- Human remains
- Puffer fish
- Selected insects
- Ethno biologists found that the Puffer fish contained tetrodotoxins (known neurotoxins).
- When they looked at the voodoo potions of 5 Haitian regions, the common ingredient was the Puffer fish.



- Certain aspects of voodoo made it to America in the 1700- 1800s centering in Louisiana.
- Some voodoo practices in Louisiana remained pure, but others were diluted with local beliefs.
- Voodoo Dolls are a product of the American Voodoo experience and generally not found in the Caribbean.
- Hoodoo is a collection of Cajun magic and folklore without a theology.
- Voodoo is a way of life in many Haitian and West Indian communities.
- EMS personnel must respect the strength of the belief that voodoo can hex or heal.
- Voodoo is so strong that many die once they feel or know they have been cursed. For it to work, the victim must know about the curse and believe that voodoo is powerful.
- In Haitian and Vodoun culture, the owl is the messenger of wizards and witches. His screech presages evil.

### **Native American Medicine**

- Native American medicine is an umbrella term that encompasses the healing beliefs and practices of all indigenous people of North America.
- It combines spirituality, herbalism, and magic in treating a range of physical and emotional conditions.
- It is holistic— emphasizing the treatment of body, mind, spirit, and environment.
- Native Americans believe that the health of an individual is linked to the people and objects surrounding that person.
- Healing practices promote harmony with everyone in the community—and with the physical environment and the spiritual world.
- There is considerable variation from tribe to tribe and from one geographic region to another.
- Most practices were long established before European settlers— probably for greater than 10,000 years.

### **Despite regional and tribal differences, four practices are common to most:**

1. Use of healers (medicine men and medicine women)
2. Use of herbal remedies
3. Ritual purification or purging.
4. Observance of symbolic rituals and ceremonies.
  - Healers may use prayer, meditation, symbolic healing rituals, and counseling.
  - The healer may go into a trance and seek the help of “spirit guides.”
  - Of the top 10 herbal remedies in use today, 7 of these have been used for centuries by Native American healers.
  - The herbs used vary from tribe to tribe and are dependent upon the plants available in the area.

- Traditional purification or purging usually takes place in a “sweat lodge.”
- The patient, the healer, and any helpers pray, sing, and sometimes drum together to purify the spirits.
- Symbolic healing ceremonies and rituals vary widely.
- Many healers employ dancing, sand painting, drumming, feathers, and rattles to remove blockages and stagnation in energy that may lead to poor health.

Sand paintings (primarily Navajo) were very symbolic and used to illustrate stories describing legendary figures who go through daring adventures to reach the gods to obtain cures for their ailments.

The medicine wheel is an important part of Native American medicine:

- They are power points -- vortexes of energy and healing.
- The 4 vectors represent 4 spiritual paths.

### **East (White)**

- The spirit path.
- Represents:
  - Dawn
  - Spring
  - Youth
  - The higher world.
- Stands for new beginnings and spiritual purity.

### **South (Blue)**

- The peace path.
- Represents:
  - Summer
  - Play
  - Innocence
  - Happiness

### **West (Yellow)**

- Symbolizes the west.
- Represents:
  - Twilight
  - Autumn
  - Maturing of life
  - Physical activity

## North (Black)

- Symbolizes the north.
- Represents:
  - Night
  - Winter
  - Old age
  - Death
  - Witchcraft.

## Red

- Symbolizes power.
- Represents:
  - Power
  - The life force
  - Danger.

In Native American folklore, owls represent wisdom and happiness and have powers of prophecy.

In Native American medicine, coyotes are spiritual beings— survivors from a better time. In some tribes (Caddo) the coyote caused the spirits of the dead to wander the land in search of the road to the spiritual world.

## Oriental Folk Medicine

- Oriental folk medicine varies significantly across Asia and the Pacific rim.
- Chinese medicine is the best known oriental system of medicine.
- Many cultures still practice folk medicine.
- Of particular interest are the Hmong.
- One of the oldest people in Asia.
- Originated in central China.
- Hmong are largely agrarian.
- Recruited for special forces in a “secret war” in Laos, they were strong allies of the U.S.
- After Laos fell to the Communists, more than 100,000 Hmong were killed.
- Migrated to southeast Asia.
- Because of their strong anti-Communist views, over 150,000 emigrated to the United States and were settled (with the aid of church groups) throughout the country.
- Today, there are about 300,000 Hmong in the United States
- The Hmong (hill people) believe in demons, gods, and evil spirits.
- They often put more faith in a shaman than traditional physicians.
- The shaman will enter a trance state to communicate with the spirits of dead ancestors to determine what is wrong.

- They place a string on the sick person's wrist to prevent loss of their soul.

### **Oriental folk medicine believes disease has 3 causes:**

1. Naturalistic (bad winds, spoiled foods)
2. Supernaturalistic (influenced by the gods and demonic spells)
3. Metaphysical (hot and cold)

### **Common practices:**

- Rubbing the skin with coins or spoons after application of wintergreen and other oils (coining)
- Pinching the skin to the point of causing an abrasion.
- Application of a hot cup to an exposed area.

Coining and other Hmong folk healing techniques can be misinterpreted as child abuse to those unfamiliar with the culture.

- The Hmong strongly prize the integrity of the body.
- They believe that body parts mutilated in accidents, surgery, or autopsy will remain that way in the spiritual world.
- They believe that a person's body contains only a finite amount of blood.
- The shaman will enter a trance state to communicate with the spirits of dead ancestors to determine what is wrong.
- They place a string on the sick person's wrist to prevent loss of their soul.
- In addition to faith and rituals, the Hmong place great faith in herbs and herbal medicines.
- The importance of the extended family (clan) is extremely important.

### **Southern Folk Medicine**

- Southern folk medicine is not an organized folk medicine system, but a collection of folk medicine practices brought to the south with settlement.
- It is a combination of:
  - *African-American* belief systems
  - *European-Anglo* belief systems
  - *Mexican-American* belief systems
  - *Native-American* belief systems

## Anglo-European

- Most cures and remedies were based on whatever was available to treat illness—typically home remedies of various sorts.

### *Examples:*

- Common household items: kerosene, soda, coal oil, sugar, whiskey, vinegar, etc.
- Sympathetic magic to transfer illness to another person, plant, or animal.
- Magical spells sometimes used (e.g. “*sty, sty leave my eye; catch the first one passing by.*”)

## Mexican-American

- Most cures and remedies were based on curanderismo, Native American practices, and religious beliefs.

## African-American

- Derived from African and European folk medicine.
- Voodoo influence heavy in some areas.
- Most remedies are practical using what is available.

### *Examples:*

- Snuff for bee stings.
- Placing a broom straw on top of a baby’s head cures hiccoughs.
- Following nail puncture wounds, the nail was driven into the chimney to keep down soreness and prevent lock jaw.

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## African-American

- “Root Doctors,” who were often descendents of African medicine men, were consulted to cure serious illnesses.
- It is important to remember that folk medicine beliefs are just as real to believers as modern medicine is to us.
- The similarities between the types of folk medicine discussed points to a common history and common belief systems.
- We are much more alike in this world than we are different.