Indigenous Ways of Knowing: A Qualitative Study of Health and Illness

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Background

- Guatemala is composed of 51% indigenous Maya (Minority Rights Group International, 2008).
- Guatemalans are the 6th largest Latino subgroup in the US (Motel & Patten, 2012).
- Diarrheal disease from unsafe drinking water is a major cause of infant mortality in Guatemala.
- A 10-year international partnership sought to improve family health through the distribution of water filters to Mayan families.
- No studies were found that examined an indigenous Maya understanding of health and illness.

Purpose

- Explore a Maya understanding of health and illness.

Method

- A qualitative descriptive study was conducted in 2017 guided by Kleinman’s (1980) explanatory model.
- A female village leader provided entry and trust among the participants.
- A bilingual research team interviewed 10 Maya heads of household (9 female, 1 male).
- Interviews were translated from Spanish to English and validated by a native-speaker.
- Content analysis was used to interpret data.

Findings

- The top three factors identified as keeping families healthy were: 1) vegetables and fruits; 2) filtered water; and 3) herbal remedies.
- A healthy child was described as playful, fat or hungry, and happy. An ill child was described as inactive, sad, and crying.
- In recounting a child’s serious illness, one mother stated, “This happened not as a result of my lack of care.”
- The health department was the most commonly used resource by these families. Traditional healers were not widely used for health or illness care.
- Female participants were reserved and provided brief responses to open-ended questions.

Implications

- Conduct cultural assessments that include sources of protein and use of herbs.
- Assess source of drinking water.
- Provide health teaching with caregivers on early signs and symptoms of illness.
- Expand cultural sensitivity training to clinicians that includes praise and encouragement to caregivers.
- Develop partnerships with local health departments to ensure quality services.
- Investigate empowerment strategies for Maya women in this community.

References


Acknowledgments: La Unión Centro Lingüístico, Antigua, Guatemala