



Culture, Beliefs and Health Care Utilization in Africa

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The provision of healthcare is a challenge in many settings. The lack of adequate supply such as of nurses, doctors, and medication is not always the reason for this. Often a lack of trust in public health services can inhibit people to take up treatments and prevent diseases even when access is provided. In this seminar, **Sara Lowes**, Assistant Professor at the University of California, San Diego, and **Ghyslain Mombo-Ngoma**, Head of the Clinical Operations Department at the Centre de Recherches Médicales de Lambaréné (CERMEL), in Lambaréné in Gabon, discussed the causes, consequences and potential solutions for tackling the distrust in public health services in Africa. The session was jointly organized by **Jan Priebe** from the Bernhard Nocht Institute for Tropical Medicine (BNITM), Hamburg.

Sara Lowes presented her recent work on the impact of the colonial French health campaigns in Central and Western Africa on distrust in the health care system today. Observing that culture and beliefs are important determinants of health care demand, Sara investigated together with her co-author Eduardo Montero how exposure to colonial medical campaigns from 1921 to 1956 affects indicators such as the vaccination uptake and the share of blood test refusals. They found the campaigns' exposure to be negatively associated with vaccination take-up and positively related to blood test refusals today. They argue that because of the imposition and many flaws in the application of medical interventions in the previous century, distrust in biomedicines passed through generations in the countries.

Sara discussed preliminary results of her recent work that explores whether individuals attribute the origin of different diseases to spiritual causes and how this relates to the way they believe the illness should be treated.

Offering a field perspective, Ghyslain Mombo-Ngoma presented insights and challenges from the clinical trials and health campaigns conducted by CERMEL in Gabon. To start, he introduced the audience to the traditional health and religious context in Gabon, showing how the beliefs about health are associated with the idea of wholeness and religious concepts. He introduced the assumptions behind evidence-based medicine and presented CERMEL's work based on these premises.

Despite progress, Ghyslain pointed out that there is still a lot of mistrust in evidence-based medicine from those parts of the population that rely on traditional African medicine. This is reflected by people both avoiding doctors when they are sick, and also, not participating in clinical trials. Thus, key populations who could benefit the most from medical innovations often find themselves excluded from the product development process, missing out on the impact of new interventions. According to him, many problems in real life happen because cultural and social issues are not taken into account in the first stages of the clinical trials.

During the Q&A session, the audience inquired about the speakers' perspective on the flexibility of beliefs and the ethical considerations associated with contemplating changes in the beliefs of a community. Sara argued that, as the medical campaigns from the begging of the 20th century still have a relevant impact on people's beliefs now, they have shown to be very persistent. On the second question, Sara said that changing beliefs should not be a goal in any case. To increase the demand for biomedicine is more relevant to focus on improving the quality and adaptability of medicines and to build connections between health care workers and citizens, mainly by involving people from the community as workers in the healthcare system as well. Ghyslain pointed out the importance of valuing traditional African medicine and not treating it only as alternative medicine. To him, expanding studies on the effects of traditional African medicine and understanding how to incorporate its effective solutions into the healthcare system is central to build a more integrative system that resonates with citizens.

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