

Suaad Al-Oraimi

The Effect of Social Change on Traditional Medicine in the United Arab Emirates (UAE)

Abstract

Based on an empirical investigation, this paper explores the interaction between Arabic-Islamic and Western medical systems in the United Arab Emirates (UAE); how this interaction has developed over time, and how these two systems have been subject to social, economic, and political change. The focus will be on development of the Western style of medical care since the establishment of the state the UAE, in 1971, and on how the traditional medical system has been affected by the Western influence. Due to the discovery of oil and the rapid change in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as in the other Gulf States, social lifestyle has changed. The medical system is one of the social structures that have been affected by the modern life. Health care has been the priority of the UAE government since its establishment in 1971. To create and sustain human development, the country has established a free of charge Western style health infrastructure and liked the development of its medical system to the West (during that time, many people regarded a Western approach to medicine as a model). However, the Western influence has found a sort of resistance from other people who believe in traditional medicine. They call for a return to the fundamental medical practice which is based on the Qura'n and Islamic knowledge. Since the mid eighties, the Islamic movement has been at the heart of social and political changes through out the Arabic and Islamic World, and people become uncertain about Western knowledge in different fields (including medicine). Therefore, since that time, people in the UAE have constructed their own knowledge of medication and tried to move away from the Western ones.

Introduction

The main purpose of this paper is to explore the effect of social and economic change on the traditional medicine and the impact of Western medicine on the government health system. This paper explores the link between social change and the change in the health-care system in the UAE and use Al-Ain city as a case study; change that has been brought about since discovery of oil and maintained by modernization and global economy. The paper exposes how change has come through the national policy of modernization processes including the health sector. This paper explores the initial move towards modern medicine, facilitated by revenues from oil, as well as the return by Emiratis to traditional medicine for their health problems. Modern medicine has not replaced traditional medicine; rather, traditional medicine has a hidden presence within the modern health sector in the UAE.

With the discovery of oil in the sixties and the establishment of the federal state of the UAE in the 1971, a dramatic and rapid change has taken place. Everyday life in the UAE has been influenced by Western modernization. The medical system is one of the social structures that have been affected by modern life. Since the establishment of the state, the health care has become the priority of the government. To assist and sustain human development, the country has established a non-charge modern health infrastructure and shifted its medical system to Western medicine. On the other hand, traditional medicine has received little or no support from the health Ministry. During the sixties and seventies, people were fascinated by social Western medicine which was being promoted as the solution for most if not "all" health problems.

Today, people are going back to traditional medicine. The use of alternative medicine varies from one culture to another but in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) the common alternative medicine, is herbal medicine. This medicine has been the main form of treatment in the UAE as well as in the Arabic-Peninsula since ancient time and consolidated by Islam and the "Medicine of the Prophet" that refers to Islamic principles.

Traditional medicine has had its own strategy and influence on people in the UAE and on the national policy of the health sector. The effect of the local medicine was hidden until the increasing Islamic movement called for return to the fundamental medical method and Medicine of the Prophet and Islamic knowledge. In this regard, the religious view of medication is related to the general Islamic awareness that grew in the region three decades ago.

Since the mid eighties, the Islamic movement has become the heart of social and political changes throughout the Arabic and Islamic World, and people have become uncertain about Western knowledge in different fields (including medicine). Thus, people have tried either to move away from the modern medical system and constructed their own knowledge of medication, or to combine traditional medicine with modern ones. Going back to the traditional medicine is an acknowledgement of the existence of Arab and Islamic heritage and a reaction against Western influence.

Based on an empirical investigation, data shows that the alternative therapies have been taken place in the UAE. All the twenty people who were interviewed for this paper indicated that they have used both: modern and traditional medicine. People who are in their fifties and above indicated that they changed their medical attitudes when the government establishment the new health system in the late sixties. However, by the mid-eighties these people changed their view of the modern therapy because they were being influenced by religious discussion. This shows that the effect of social change on medicine has taken place over two time period. While in the early sixties and seventies, traditional medicine was dominated by the Western health care method, since the mid-eighties the traditional medicine, especially the Medicine of the Prophet, has reestablished itself and been re-recognized. People have come to resist modern medical domination.

Based on this fact, the theory of this paper assumes that the change in the medical structure in the UAE has been based on economic, social, and political change as well as on a religious belief and Islamic discourse. People in the Arab World (including UAE) are trying to go back, to their heritage, to find certain and quick solutions for most of their problems including health. These solutions must come from within and be based on their heritage.

History and Patterns of Social Change

The UAE is a tiny oil-rich country located in the Arabic-Persian Gulf, and considered as an Arab and Muslim land. As a semi-institutional monarchy, the UAE was established on December 2nd 1971, as a federation of seven Emirates "states": Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Al-Sharja, Ajman, Um-Al-Quiwain, Ras Al-khaima, and Al-Fujaira. The federation was established nine years after oil was discovered in the emirate of Abu-Dhabi, the current capital of the UAE. In 1970, these emirates achieved independence from British; formerly they were protectorates with a representative of the British government which monitored all the area's political and economic activities. Hence, the interaction with the West is related to the colonial period and maintained by modernization and global economy.

Social change refers to the processes of alternative choices in social values, beliefs, legal system, and social institutions. This change also affects people in everyday life, their thinking, acting, and reacting to the change and other people in society. Change also can be gradual and smooth or rapid and rushed; in the UAE social change has taken a hurried and active direction. Nevertheless, the development processes have not moved people completely from their traditions to the norms of other modernized societies. As a result, this change has taken two patterns: material and non-material.

First, the pattern of material change is characterized by rapid and quick transformation. Modernization has flowed throughout society: in economy, infrastructure, demographic structure, social structure, the family, lifestyle, educational system, housing, even medication and food. People have moved from the traditional poor life to modern wealthy system. The oil-wealth, modernization process, and cultural interaction have built a new lifestyle structure. People have become more modernized—local lifestyle (including medical treatment) has been dominated by Western culture.

The pattern of nonmaterial social change, which is the focus of this paper, has not gone so far—it has, in fact, been very slow. Although they live in a modern world, people in the UAE still maintain their nonmaterial social traditions. Because of economic prosperity, modernization has been implemented on a very large-scale and very quickly—people have not been given time to arrange their lives based on the new social structure. Therefore, the material social aspects have been changing rapidly, and the non-material mind-sets have moved slowly. Hence, the medical approach in the UAE has become neither purely modern nor purely traditional (Al-Oraimi 2004).

The Roots of the Western Medicine in the UAE

The establishment of the Western medical systems in the UAE started in the mid- fifties by Christian missionaries (previous to the discovery of oil in Abu-Dhabi in the early sixties), leading to establishment of hospital in the beginning of the sixties. A paradigm shift has been taking place with the emergence of the revolutionary Western view of illness and healing. Due to the discovery of oil and the rapid change in the UAE, social lifestyle has also been changing. Medical system is one of the social structures that has affected by the modern life since the time of oil discovery and the establishment of the federal state in 1971. Health care has become the priority of the UAE government. To initiate and sustain human development, the country has established modern health infrastructure based on Western model because it meets the national objectives for health-care. During that time, people were fascinated by the change and the Western treatment, which worked out for most of health problems. Religious figures also celebrated the scientific revolution of medicine; thus, both types of treatment have integrated through practice. This confrontation between Arab-Islamic and Western medicine has been developed over time as these two systems have become subject to social, economic, and political change.

Literature Review

Little has been done about social change and medicine, especially in the UAE; thus this paper will start from ground-zero and depend on empirical study. However, there are some valuable experiences from the developing world regarding the integration between traditional medicine and Western view of healthcare.

Despite, the modern lifestyle in the UAE, people still integrate herbal medicine and spiritual therapy into a modern healthcare. For instance, a study conducted about the "use of alternative medicine" among medical-student in UAE University in 2000, showed that 73% of the students indicated personal use of "herbal medicine" and 76% reported use by a friend or relative (M.Y. Hasan, M. Das & S. Behjat 2000). Nevertheless the use of multiple forms of modern and traditional healthcare is widespread in the UAE.

Similar to the UAE, people in developing countries have been affected by change and modernized life. However, based on certain circumstances, change has not completely impacted the traditional culture, especially medicine. The use of traditional medicine as an alternative for modern healthcare still exists. According to Gerard Bodeker, that 80% of the

population in the developing countries are cared for by traditional practitioners because they do not have access to modern medicine (Bodeker 2001). However, if people in the developing world have been forced by need to use traditional medicine, people in the UAE have free access to full healthcare.

The same practice can be also found in Asian countries, such as China, South Korea, and India. For example, in Taiwan, 60% of the public use multiple healing systems; in China the government mobilizes all healthcare resources to meet national objectives for primary healthcare and integrated the traditional medicine into national healthcare 55 years ago. In India and South Korea, change started with politicization of the traditional health-system and resulted in the national policy (Ibid), and Indian government, which has issued licenses for practitioners in traditional medicine (Ibid), the official authority in the UAE still pays little attention to local medicine.

The integration between traditional medicine and Islamic medicine, as it has been presented in the Qura'n, Hadiths, and the Medicine of the Prophet is discussed in this paper; such a topic is also presented as a developing dialogue between medicine and religion in a study conducted by Gerard Jansen about Western secularized medicine and its impact on host cultures (Jansen 2000).

The equation of social change and the change in national healthcare system in the developing countries is discussed seriously by the World Health Organization. Traditional medicine is strongly presented as an alternative healthcare. The organization encourages the national planners to integrate the traditional medicine with the modern one.

The UAE is one of those countries mentioned in the annual report of this organization. In 1996, the UAE has established the Zayed Complex for Herbs Research and Traditional Medicine. One of its missions is to collect record and analyze the traditional medicine knowledge from traditional practitioners (Correa 2002). This recognition of traditional medicine is to the West's connected reevaluation of the value of traditional medicine. According to participants, this shift in attitude is the result of the realization by Western countries of the negative impact of chemical medicine and its side effects on public life.

The relationship between belief, illness, and social change is promoted in an academic work presented by Virginia Lee Dean in her dissertation on Uganda. She believes that illness beliefs are sensitive indicators of social change in a society (Dean 1978). She studies the Ugandan society and discovered that illness can be regarded as a social phenomenon as a way to get at people's religious and cosmological ideas without inquiring about them directly.

Social change and its impacts on the traditional aspects, such as illness and belief are presented in this study. In Islamic culture, the cause and effect of illness is always referred to the religious beliefs. This fact can be found in the narrative stories of the participants, who provided this paper with their feelings and beliefs. Also, the spiritual therapy, which has had a deep presence in the Islamic history, is the best indicator of the relationship of illness, beliefs, and social change. Young generations for example, are less sensitive towards spiritual therapy.

Method of Empirical Investigation

This paper is based on an exploratory approach to field work—using open-ended questions to initiate face-to-face discussion as means of empirical investigation. A method of action research is also applied, where participants are the actual part of the research. Since this paper focuses on the most imminent topic (health), people are given more space and time to act and react. The sample of this paper is based on non-random selection; fifteen persons, males and females, were chosen by snow-ball judgmental sampling method. Their age is between 20-60 years old, all of them married and have children. The level of education of the participants is between the illiterate to college degree. Some participants located in the local communities in Al-Ain City, in the traditional medical clinics in (Al-Ain), and the others were selected based on personal relationships.

Methods of Data Collection:

This study uses multiple methods of data collections: It relies on fieldwork of empirical observations, face-to-face interviews, personal knowledge about the use of herbs among the population of the city, which is chosen for this study (Al-Ain), conversation with one of the pioneers who established medical-missionaries in "Al-Ain City." Archival materials have been obtained from healthcare centers in Al-Ain. The face-to-face interviews have been conducted with twenty people, males and females, all of them experience alternative medicine, such as herbs and spiritual therapy, and all of them indicated that their friends and relative also use traditional medicine and homoeopathic therapy.

Findings:

-It is a fact that social, economic, and political structures in the UAE have their own mechanism in promoting a new form of change. Yet, despite the rapid change, most of the cultural aspects still have remarkable effects on the everyday life. Medicine, which is the main focus for this paper, is one of those cultural aspects that have fostered a realistic presence within the new society. The result of this study shows that all 20 people interviewed for this work admitted personal use of traditional herbs medicine and use by their families and friends. This finding is supported by a study conducted in 2000 about alternative medicine in the UAE. This study suggested that alternative medicine has an "enormous hidden presence and influence within the healthcare system of the UAE" (2000:4).

-Change has not always been welcomed by people in the UAE; there is a belief that change has brought illness and diseases. All participants indicated that there are some diseases which have come with change and are not related to the local environment; thus they cannot be treated by herbs. Change in lifestyle and diet cause health problems, such as cancer. Also, with change different people from various cultures have flowed to the country and brought their environmental diseases with them.

Also, results show a link between traditional medicine and religion, and within the medical profession there are religious and ethical dimensions. Herbal treatment in the UAE is usually integrated into spiritual therapy; people have a strong faith in certain herbs, and consider them as benediction because they were used by Prophet Mohammed. Also, they integrate herbal treatment with reading of the Qur'an, or write specific Suras from the Qur'an on papers and keep them about their person. Such a remedy is usually used for psychological problems, or against the evil eye. This fact is also mentioned in a study conducted about the use of traditional and Islamic medicine in Syria. The study showed that the Qur'an contains some medical references and the "Hadiths" provide useful references in collections and "compiled by eminent theologians" (Sincich 2002).

- Muslims, have their own agenda in using Islamic cure for certain illness and following Prophet Mohammed direction of the "Medicine of the Prophet." People use traditional medicine and herbs through the principle of religion because they believe that recovery comes from Allah not from medicine. Medicine is just a means, but the effect is given by Allah. According to them, to be recovered, we need to believe in a religious therapy first, and establish a spiritual relationship with Allah. Without faith, herbs will not be suitable. Participants also reported that Western medicine cannot cure the illness in the name of Allah, because it is secular medicine.

-Some participants indicated that they replaced the traditional religious cure with modern medicine, but they were not comfortable; therefore, they have come back to the traditional medicine and religious therapy especially for mental illness. In their view, psychologically, traditional medicine is more effective than the modern ones.

-There is also a positive link between gender and the use of a spiritual therapy; women are more likely to believe in the holy treatment and have more faith in religious therapy for physical and mental problems. They consider religion as an emancipation from secular Western medicine. Also, women have more experience than men in using herbs; they can treat themselves at home without prescription, while, men have more knowledge about Islamic cupping (*cut the skin and sucking out some blood*) because it was used by the Prophet himself. Men also have the ability to classify illness and their remedies. They believe that if they know the cause of the illness, they can treat it without going to the hospital.

-Another positive link can be found between the level of education and the use of multiple medicines. Participants who hold college degree are more likely to integrate modern medicine into traditional ones, while illiterate people prefer herbal medicine and spiritual therapy. Educated people believe in the co-existence of both medicines, modern and traditional. For example, they prefer to use herbal treatment for simple illness because they are aware of the impact of chemical medicine on their health. Yet, they use modern medicine for serious diseases because they feel more confident.

-Age also plays a crucial role in the use of traditional medicine. Young people, who are in their twenties, are more likely to use a combination of modern and traditional medicine; while they believe in traditional medicine, they experience the modern ones. They do not consider herbs as treatment, but as traditional customs; they reported that the traditional medicine cannot be used as painkiller or to provide fast relief. On the other hand, people who are more

than 45 years old seem to conceptualize their-own medical doctrines. There is a deep concern of spiritual influence in treating most human problems. Some of them also mentioned doctor-patient relationship; they reported that the traditional practitioners appreciate patient attitudes and behaviors, while Western doctors cannot understand them. However, those people still have certain respect for modern medicine and use it whenever the traditional medicine becomes less effective especially with certain diseases.

-Different genders, educational level, and different ages produced different attitudes. While, young men emphasize the alternative medicine (herb medicine), young women give more emphasize to the holy therapy. Educated people are more likely to accept modern medicine and justify the situation, while old people wish to integrate the traditional healthcare with the national health system.

Interviewees and their Narrative Stories: (8) participants, men and women provide this study with their personal experience with alternative medicine.

Interviewee # (1) is a female illiterate (65) years old, married and has (10) children

I use herbs everyday, not as a treatment for illness, but for protection. Herbs should be use as a treatment and remedy, or as a cure against diseases and evil. I trust herbs because they are mentioned in the Qura'n. Allah has not made illness without a recovery from them. I also used to use Western medicine, but I become afraid of it since there are lots of mistake modern doctors did for people; while there is no side-effect from using herbs. Western medicine has come with change and brought disease with it; the government replaced all traditional medicine with modern one. This is wrong. People trust herbs and use them everyday. I raised my children without doctor; just give them natural food, such as camel-milk, honey, and herbs. If they got very sick, I use religious therapy: the Qura'n, Allah gives good health not medicine. My grandchildren go to the hospital, and they are not as healthy as their parents are.

Interviewee # 2 is a female housewife (55 years old), hold no degree, but can read and write, and has (7) children

I tried Western medicine when I was young and my children were little, but I went back to the Islamic medicine. I believe more in the Prophet-Medicine, but sometime I use modern medicine. I use Islamic-medicine because I learned that from my family; from the experience of my mother. We have had our own traditional medicine, and people believe in it because it is based on the Islamic knowledge. Also, there is no side-effect of the traditional medicine; if it does not help, it never causes problem. In the hospitals, there are many medical-mistakes. I go to the traditional therapist whenever I feel I need help, but some time I use some herbs myself, because I have the experience. I also go to the hospital because there are some diseases that have come with change and there is no efficient cure for them in traditional treatment.

Interviewee # 3 is a female, 40 years old, holds a college degree, (school principal) married and has 5 children.

Change is part of our life and sometimes it happens against our will. However, the change that has been brought about buy oil, in this country, has been planned by the government. Change affects

economic, social, political systems; health care as a part of our social system, becomes subject to rapid change, sometimes, it is harmful. The state has brought the mechanism of change from outside; healthcare system is structured based on Western view. Yet, people here have their own way of life- have their own illness and cure. They have been influenced by their environment and also they have their own mechanism to alter the environment. It is fine to borrow some new ideas in medicine, but it is wrong to take it for granted. I do believe in change and I use alternative medicine but I agree that not all illness can be treated by herbs. Some disease, especially those which come with change, cannot be treated by herbs.

Interviewee # 4 is a female (accounting) 25 years old, holds a college degree, married and has 2 children.

I believe in the Islamic-medicine and I wish that the medical system recognized it and gave it credit. People feel more comfortable with their medicine more than the Western one. I agree that there are some diseases which cannot be treated by herbs only, but needs chemical therapy, such as cancer. However, Islamic medicine has its own miracle and can treat such a disease when a person has faith in the holy treatment. People believe in their religion and that help them to recovery. Western medicine is based on secular ideology, which conflict with our faith of Allah. Religious healing is important especially for elderly people. Change brings everything from outside even diseases, and never appreciates the local elements of the culture. The health system should go back to the traditional medicine since it has become obvious and recognized by educated young people. I believe this recognition has come with the awareness of the importance of the culture and heritage.

Interviewee # (5) is a male (70) years old, illiterate, traditional medicine practitioner and has (8) children.

In this country, life was so difficult. I started to treat sick people, when I was 25 years old. I have had knowledge about herbs and collected them from the desert; some of them come from Oman, Iran and India. When people got sick, I treated them by the Qura'n, herbs, and honey. With some tough illness, I use hot soils, put them on the body, or use fire by burning the ill part of body off (just little). For blood-pressure, I use Islamic cupping, and for mental illness, I use the Qura'n, and for stomach problems, I use diet food and herbs. The prophet Mohammed says "stomach is the house of all diseases, and the diet is the cure." Allah gives us choice and we need to manage our life. Sometime, I give the same cure for men and women alike, but women are quickly getting well more than men because they have strong faith in the holy cure. With the new society, everything is going through changes and people also changed. Some changes are good, but change that destroyed our health system is not acceptable. We have lived with it a very long time; I ask the government to integrate the local therapies with the modern medicine and let people chose.

Interviewee # (6) is a male businessman (58) years old, holds high school diploma, married, and has (10) children).

I experienced the two medicines: traditional and modern, but I am more familiar with the traditional medicine because it is related to religion and culture, also the traditional medicine is good for health, has no side effect. Some time I feel I do not need to go to the doctor and use herbs, but if there some serious problem that needs immediate help, such as car accidents, the traditional medicine would not be suitable. My wife needed a caesarean section herbs would not help her. I believe in the Prophet's medicine and I realize that recovery is given by Allah, not by medicine, but in order to help us, Allah wants us to help ourselves. Why should we need to follow the Western ideology in everything

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including medicine? The government has established a huge modern medical structure; it is good, but it would be better if they integrate the modern with the Islamic-Medicine.

Interviewee # (7) is a male (35) years old, holds a college degree, (medical doctor) married and has (3 children).

I graduated from medical school (modern medicine), but I have an idea about traditional medicine as a doctor. Let us go back to pre oil period, to see what is right about the traditional medicine, and who people believe in the Islamic-medicine that provided by Prophet Mohammed. People have a faith in herbs that was used by the Prophet and they recover because of this belief; as a doctor, I must respect their feelings. Some time I ask my patients to use certain herbs because I myself use them for the cold for example. My parents use herbs everyday, especially in the winter, to avoid flu. I have faith in God, and I believe that half of the treatment is related to psychological thinking; if we combine modern medicine with the traditional one, the result will be more than satisfactory. That requires the government to establish an integrated medical system in the medical school just like in Asian countries. In Europe, now the focus has shifted to the herbal treatment; people have become aware of the side-effect caused by chemical medicine.

Interviewee # (8) is a male (24) years old, holds a collage degree, (police mane) unmarried.

Social change has brought a new view of every single aspect in our life. Change also affects the traditional medicine and the healthcare system has been dominated by Western lifestyle. I use herbs medicine very often; my mother gives it to me whenever I catch cold. It is more effective than the modern medicine. Also I cannot use chemical medicine everyday, while I use herbs with honey every morning, just as tea. The Prophet himself had used herbs and honey as a cure for certain illness. I have had tonsillitis and the doctor did not provide me with efficient cure, but when I took certain herbs I recovered immediately. I have no idea why our medical system has changed. Change is nice, but we need to keep the good things in our culture. Our medicine is based on our religion, on the Qura'n; we have Islamic-medicine from long history, and we must keep it just like India and China.

Discussion

These narrative stories, interviews, and observations suggest that the change, which has been promoted during the seventies by the government, affected the social life in the UAE at large. Practice of traditional medicine has also been dominated by the Western view. However, according to empirical data, Western medicine did not occupy an Arab-Islamic cultural vacuum. The majority of people interviewed still believe in their own traditional medicine. This fact provides an overview about the direction of social change and its impact on the healthcare system. In the sixties and seventies, people were fascinated by the luxury life and accepted the Western method of healthcare because the hospitals provided significant healing and healthcare. Later on, the view has changed and people built deep awareness about the impact of outside culture on their society. Change in people attitudes and behavior towards Western medicine reflects not only the awareness of the side-effects of chemical medicine on the public life, but also reflects the awareness of the Islamic discourse about the Islamic identity.

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The critical issue here, however, is that the social, economic, and political systems in the UAE have been going towards the direction of global based change. The deep concern here is what role the Islamic medicine will play within the global commercialized medicine. As it mentioned earlier, going back to the Islamic heritage reveals the crisis that people in the Arab and Islamic world experience within a post-modern society. As we know, the Gulf States, including the UAE are going through the final face of global interaction. This might create challenge for the local culture to cope with this globalized change; change that might shake the stability of the local culture and national identity.

