



In Rural India, Medical Myths Spread

This is the VOA Special English Health Report.

Rural areas of India may have few doctors or other health resources. Instead, many people use traditional healers. These faith-based healers, or witch doctors, sometimes have strange theories about how the body works.

In West Bengal, for example, some people have long believed that getting bitten by a dog leads to the birth of puppies. Dr. Kumar Kanti Ghosh is a psychiatrist. He helped document this belief in so-called puppy pregnancy syndrome for an article. It appeared in the Lancet medical journal in two thousand three.

His interest started when a nine-year-old boy came to his health clinic about ten days after being bitten by a dog.

KUMAR KANTI GHOSH: "He believes that he had developed a pregnancy with a puppy inside his abdomen. And sometimes also his parents have said that sometimes the boy is barking like a dog."

A healer named Budheswar Singh says his mixture of yogurt and herbs has cured many people. "If the man is brought to me on time, I can give him my medicine and he will be all right."

Sanjay Samui is a medical doctor who wishes people would stop believing ideas like this. "They are uneducated village people -- they still hold on to such superstitions," he says. He tells everyone that in no situation can a puppy be born inside a human body.

The national government spends about one and a half percent of India's gross domestic product on health care. This is among the lowest rates in the world. It means faith healers are the only choice in some places. The healers spread medical myths and even build distrust against doctors.

But in some countries, doctors may seek help from traditional healers.

Officials in Russia have counted at least eight hundred thousand alternative healers -- more than the number of medical doctors. Daria Minerova, a healer in Moscow, told a reporter last year that doctors often called on her to either cast

spells or clear spells for patients. She said they ask her for help when they have a difficult case in trying to cure a patient.

Health care in Russia is basically free. So cost does not explain why people seek alternative healers. Marina Belorysova, a college-educated English teacher in Moscow, told a reporter last year that people avoid western medical care in Russia for a different reason.

MARINA BELORYSOVA: "Medicine is very poor in Russia. It is very bad. At least they know when they use alternative medicine, nothing really bad will happen, right?"

And that's the VOA Special English Health Report. You can find a video about medical myths in rural India at voaspecialenglish.com. I'm Steve Ember.

Contributing: Kurt Achin and Jessica Golloher