AN ETHNO-EPIDEMIOLOGICAL STUDY OF
LAY BELIEFS AND EXPERIENCES OF
FEVER-RELATED ILLNESS AMONG LAOTIAN PATIENTS
LIVING NEAR THE LAO-THAI BORDER

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Socio-cultural studies have shown the wide variety of perceptions on fever. Fever, the most common symptom of infectious diseases, has different names and meanings according to the areas, customs and cultures (Davis-Roberts 1981; Uba 1992; Kamat 2006; Gibbs and Lurie 2007; Rasbridge and Kemp 2007). The objective of the research was, through the adoption of an ethno-epidemiological approach, to better understand lay beliefs, experiences and practices related to fever-related illness among local and cross-border Laotian people from three different communities.

Laotian knows they get fever or ‘khaj’ after they are ‘jab king’ or touching their body parts (i.e., forehead, neck, arms and legs). They have other terms for ‘fever’ such as ‘jeb’ or ‘puiy’. Moreover, the term related to fever is built on the general term for fever or khaj. Fever-related illness is caused by ‘sia khwan’ (soul loss), ‘plian akard’ (seasonal change), ‘hed wieg nak’ (hard work), or even ‘tidpad’ (intrusion of foreign particles into the body). This last cause is generally stressed when fever and symptoms of other illness (i.e. an acute febrile respiratory infection, dengue or hemorrhagic fever) are becoming more severe.

Laotian people have different therapeutic methods. I found that their therapeutic choices sometimes did not harmonize with and support previous socio-anthropological researches (Westermeyer 1988). In case of failure of home remedies, for example, they have recourse to Western medicine more than to traditional medicine, especially when the patient is the unique child of a family or when another patient presenting with the same symptoms died in the community. Moreover, they frequently choose to cross the border for seeking health care services in Thailand because of their confidence in the quality and efficiency of the health care system there.

The adoption of an ethno-epidemiology approach to the study of local perceptions on infectious and non infectious diseases will help health care workers and social scientists to understand local beliefs and experiences on health and illness and may lead to right healing and to the promotion of preventive behaviours, especially in case of contagious diseases.

KEYWORDS: FEVER-RELATED ILLNESS / LAO HEALTH CULTURE / LAY BELIEF / ETHNO-EPIDEMIOLOGY/QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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Abstract

This study is designed to explore the beliefs, experiences, and behavioral responses of Laotian patients living near the Lao-Thai border, particularly those who present with fever-related illnesses. The research was conducted in a rural community in northeastern Thailand, where traditional health practices and beliefs coexist with modern medical care.

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys. The primary data collection methods included semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observations. The study aimed to understand the interplay between traditional and modern healthcare systems and their impact on health outcomes.

Key findings revealed that traditional beliefs and practices are still prevalent among Laotian patients, with a significant proportion believing in the efficacy of traditional remedies, particularly for fever-related illnesses. The study also highlighted the importance of community involvement in health education and the need for culturally sensitive healthcare interventions.

The research recommendations include the integration of traditional knowledge into modern healthcare systems, the provision of culturally appropriate health education, and the development of community-based health initiatives.

Keywords: Laotian patients, fever-related illnesses, ethno-epidemiology, traditional medicine, community health.