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Healer Treats Mind, Body, Spirit

SPECIAL REPORT

HEALTH CARE WORKERS are trying to build a link between traditional treatment and methods popular with many of Oregon's migrants



Doña Natividad Delgado massages an herbal salve into patient Nirma Rocha's forearm and draws out a gasp of pain. Delgado is a well-known curandera in Cornelius, administering to Hispanics in her living room.

PATRICIA CORDELL/The Oregonian

Healer treats mind, body, spirit

Health care workers try to make sure the remedies complement more conventional drugs

By **CRISTINE GONZALEZ**
of The Oregonian staff

CORNELIUS — Doña Natividad Delgado stands in the center of her living room, lays her hands on a patient's head and prays.

Delgado turns her attention to the woman's neck and arms, kneading them in an attempt to cure her sore throat.

Other patients sit nearby, watching a Mexican soap opera on television as they wait for cures for exhaustion, depression, "the evil

eye," and other folk maladies.

"It makes me feel good just to know that I can make a difference in their lives," said Delgado, 59, who learned the art of curanderismo, or faith healing, in her home of Nayarit, Mexico. "It's the healing that counts."

In Latin America, curanderas such as Delgado for centuries have used their folk remedies to treat the mind, body and spirit of the sick. In Oregon, a growing Hispanic community has placed their services — providing treatments of herbal concoctions, massage

and prayer — in high demand.

In their attempts to improve health care for many Hispanics, especially the 40,000 migrant farm workers who come to Oregon each year, medical organizations are beginning to link the worlds of folk and modern medicine to come up with treatment that is more holistic and culturally sensitive. The challenge is trying to make sure those folk

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Healer Treats Mind, Body, Spirit



health center doctors started to try to bridge the gap between general medicine and curanderismo."

Americans have become more receptive to alternative health care. More than 61 million Americans use alternative therapies each year, according to a study in the New England Journal of Medicine. And they spend \$13 billion a year on alternative medicine.

"What they call alternative, we call traditional," said Carolina Hess, a Portland-area expert on faith healing. She said that curanderismo has remained popular in Latin America for so long because of a high success rate and affordability.

Walking the lines of tradition and science isn't always easy for doctors and outreach workers, especially if they are Hispanic.

"We wear a lot of hats," said Francisco Garcia, an outreach worker at Salud Medical Center in Woodburn, who encourages patients to preserve their traditional beliefs. "It's not whether you believe in curanderismo; it's about accepting the cultures you're working with, not negating them."

But in some cases, he quickly adds, it pays to be skeptical.

Last year, a 24-year-old Colombian man who set up shop in Medford pleaded guilty to a racketeering charge for swindling 20 people of money they sent to him to buy candles made of human body fat and graveyard dust that supposedly contained healing powers.

Two months ago, a group of Salem families that consulted a band of unknown curanderas were swindled of \$50,000 in jewelry and money. The faith healers had one man and his son withdraw all of their money from a bank, then promised to pray over the cash to heal his chronically bad back.

News about the scam spread quickly within the Hispanic community, but it hasn't slowed patient traffic at the house of Doña Natividad Delgado.

The question for many naysayers

■ **Symptoms:** Fullness or popping of the ears; ear aches.

■ **Remedies:** Place cone of paper in ear and set on fire; blow smoke in ear.

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is whether the treatment works. Conventional medicine can't answer that yet. The nation's chief medical research arm, the National Institutes of Health, has dedicated an agency to alternative medicines to find out.

Patients respond to their curanderas based on whether they know or feel they've been healed.

When Domatila Tavera, 55, of Gaston visited her regular curandera for an injured foot, the pain only got worse.

"From now on, I'm sticking to regular doctors," she said.

That doesn't keep Tavera from referring others to curanderas. As a volunteer at the Virginia Garcia Memorial Health Clinic in Cornelius, she often tells patients who ask where to buy herbs used for remedies, where to find a curandera and how to get there.

"Most of the time, they can cure you," she said. "Or at least make you feel better."



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THE OREGONIAN, TUESDAY, OCTOBER 8, 1996

METRO/NO

Health: Bold trust in curanderas leaves modern care to bridge gap

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remedies complement prescription drugs used in more traditional medicine.

Taking herbs that clash with drugs can send patients to the emergency room. Binding coins on the bellies of newborns to produce "outie" belly buttons can cause infection. And holding babies with fallen fontanels upside down, standard advice from curanderas, and not treating them for dehydration, can leave them severely ill.

"It can be a real nightmare for physicians to figure out why people react the way they do to medication and why they're eating what they're doing," said Polly Williams, executive director of La Clinica del Valle in Medford.

To prevent complications, Oregon health care providers who serve migrants are leading a push to hire doctors who are bilingual and understand the Hispanic culture, says Ricardo Lucero of the Migrant Health Migrant Stream Coordination Project based in Seattle.

Although they knew about faith healing among their clients for decades, only this year did the clinics publish a reference handbook for doctors, nurses and others on folk illnesses and remedies.

There are no licensing or certification requirements for curanderas, according to Allen Apodaca, manager for migrant and seasonal farm worker affairs at the Northwest Regional Primary Care Association.

From common colds to diabetes, from a case of fright to the evil eye, faith healers attempt to cure ailments both real and psychological with a variety of herbal and ritual-based remedies that aren't unlike alternative therapies.

"There are no standards to evaluate them," Apodaca said. "They're just used with such a level of confidence, particularly among the Hispanic migrant community, that

Empacho or "blocked intestines"

These are common folk illnesses, their symptoms and remedies, as prescribed by curanderas. Migrant health clinics encourage patients who believe in curanderismo to work with doctors for a medical diagnosis of their illness.

Empacho or "blocked intestines"

Cause: Food sticking to intestinal walls; eating improperly cooked food; eating certain foods at the wrong times.

Symptoms: Stomach bloating, constipation, indigestion, diarrhea, vomiting and anorexia.

Remedies: Stomach massage; Chamomile or mint tea; administering olive or cooking oil by mouth.

Mal de ojo or "evil eye"

Cause: A person with a strong eye who looks at or compliments someone without touching him or her.

Symptoms: Acute fever, vomiting, excessive crying and listlessness.

Remedy: Barrida, or ceremonial sweeping with an egg and prayers.

Susto or "fright"

Cause: Involvement in a startling event, like a car accident, for example.

Symptoms: Daytime drowsiness, nighttime insomnia, irritability, depression and anxiety.

Remedies: Barrida, candle or herbal or mint tea.

Calda de mami or "fallen fontanel"

Cause: Pulling a baby away from the breast or bottle too soon; holding a baby incorrectly or letting the baby fall on the floor.

Symptoms: Diarrhea, vomiting, decreased appetite, restlessness, irritability, sunken eyes, fewer tears.

Remedies: Push up on palate; hold child upside down and hit heels; turn child upside down and shake; put foam or soap on fontanel.

Aire de oido or "air in the ear"

Cause: Getting air trapped in the ear canal.

Patients such as Laura Isidorora of Woodburn swear by faith healing.

Isidorora experienced a string of bad luck a few years ago. She sought out a curandera, who diagnosed her with a serious case of "mal de ojo," or evil eye.

The curandera began to treat her by rubbing an egg over her body. When she was done, salt had collected on the egg.

"To have salt on your body is real bad, bad luck," Isidorora recalled the curandera telling her. "The curandera threw the salt in the fire, and you could hear it cracking. I felt like I was cracking. Afterward, my life took a turn for the better."

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