

My friend the witch doctor

DAVID C. HILMERS, MD

I walked down the dusty road toward Manuel's* hut with more than a bit of trepidation. I had received a message from the clinic that the village witch doctor was sick and too ill to travel. Everyone in this remote Belizean village knew Manuel; in times past he had been the only accessible or affordable healer. As I made my way to Manuel's home with instruments in hand, visions of shrunken heads, voodoo dolls, and magic spells ran through my mind.

Belize has become a trendy tourist attraction. The abundant wildlife, Mayan ruins, spectacular barrier reef, and unique little atolls called cayes make the country an inviting destination. "Temptation Island," that television tribute to the excesses of American broadcasting, was filmed on Ambergris Caye. Belizeans still speak nostalgically of the days when the film "The Mosquito Coast" was produced here some 15 years ago.

Although this is the glamorous Belize of travel brochures, my brief medical mission trip revealed a different side of that beautiful country. Families of Mayan descent account for much of the population of the rural north. Rugged dirt roads, dusty in the dry season and sometimes impassable during the rainy months, connect small villages consisting predominantly of thatched huts surrounded by sugar cane fields, thick jungle, and swamps.

A recent drop in the price of raw cane has made the difficult financial situation of these hardworking families even more tenuous. Parishioners in the local church have banded together to plant a large garden to supplement their income. I met some of my patients for the first time while talking and weeding shoulder to shoulder in the long rows of watermelon.

Entering the group of huts that is home to several generations of Manuel's family, I was met by a pleasant woman who greeted me warmly in English. She took me to Manuel's cluttered shelter, where I met a debilitated, jaundiced man with a grossly distended abdomen. In a soft voice, he acknowledged

me from his cot, too weak to rise. On the walls hung pictures, mementos of times past, trinkets everywhere, but none of the accoutrements of his profession that I had expected: no herbs, no potions, no shrunken heads. As we discussed his condition, he freely related the reasons for his ascites and cirrhosis. The physical examination demonstrated the usual stigmata of portal hypertension.

Our conversation turned to his life and his family, but his profound fatigue limited his concentration, his sad brown eyes seldom meeting mine. I left him some diuretics, administered some parenteral thiamine into his wasted arm, and instructed him to call at once if his condition worsened. To my surprise, when I offered to pray with him for his recovery, he eagerly accepted, and his spirits seemed to be lifted upon my departure.

I called on Manuel twice more during my short stay. By the second visit he was noticeably better, sitting up at the table to eat his favorite meal of black beans, chicken, and rice. His abdominal girth steadily diminished and his eyes regained their sparkle. Little did he understand the methods of modern medicine, my life in America, my experiences, or the pharmaceuticals I had brought. But he came to realize that I was there to serve him and that by that common bond we could relate to each other. He appreciated the time that we spent praying for his health and taught me spiritual methods he had used to accomplish apparently miraculous cures.

By the last visit we stood as colleagues and friends. Although our medicines and techniques differed, we were comrades in arms as healers fighting against the suffering of our patients. As I left him for the last time, he said to me, "Tu medicina es muy fuerte"—Your medicine is very powerful. I had slowly learned from Manuel what he had known for many years: that the potency of our medicine comes less from the contents of our bags than from what we carry in our hearts.

David C. Hilmers, MD, Departments of Internal Medicine and Pediatrics, Baylor College of Medicine, 6621 Fannin St., Mail Code 1-4000, Houston, TX 77030. E-mail: dchilmer@texaschildrenshospital.org.

* Not his real name.