The Way We Live Now: Kaiya Montaocean

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In the West we often think that our high-tech medicine is the world's medicine. But the United Nations estimates that 80 percent of PWAs worldwide receive primary care from practitioners of indigenous health care systems that include medicinal plants, spiritual practices and social support. Many developing countries have networks of traditional practitioners with thoughtful ideas on HIV progression, treatments for symptoms, and plants to research for possible cures.

Before AIDS, most developing nations had "separate but equal" medical systems. Clients visited a traditional healer for one type of problem, a Western doc for another. In many places, that still happens. But over the last 15 years, the gap between Western and traditional medicine has widened. With the panic over AIDS, some countries have moved towards a more authoritarian, closed view of medicine. Western physicians increasingly denounce traditional healers as *witch doctors, voodoo practitioners* and worse.

At the last 10 international AIDS conferences, 150 studies have been presented showing some benefit for traditional medicine. But because most were small and only a few were controlled, global AIDS leaders have shown no interest in doing followups. Worse, they've denied repeated requests by traditional healers for a seat at the AIDS policy table.

This refusal to incorporate longstanding medical systems into the global AIDS fight is simply murderous. As concerned AIDS advocates call for making Western drugs accessible to developing nations, they should also insist that aid funds be earmarked to research medicinal plants (with indigenous practitioners as equal partners) and to establish traditional medicine centers for AIDS education and treatment. We have to stop the ethnocentric thought dominating global medicine. Millions of lives hang in the balance.

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