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Perceptions And Practices Of Indigenous Populations About Diabetes In Guatemala

Liesl Cohn De Leon

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Author: Liesl Cohn De León

Advisors: ChrissaLee Butler and Michelle Sands

Abstract

Diabetes is becoming a common disease among indigenous populations in Guatemala. They perceive diabetes not only as a **medical disease**, but also a **condition linked to emotions**. They say they have total confidence in the official health system, but in practice they rely on the **ancestral Mayan knowledge** of the healers and spiritual guides to **complement biomedical treatments**

Introduction

- Diabetes is a **global epidemic**. The World Health Organization estimates that more than 346 million people have diabetes, and that just in Latin America the number of people could rise from 25 million to 40 million by 2030 (Pérez et al, 2013).
- Among **indigenous populations** around the world, the percentage of those affected with diabetes reaches **up to 50%** (Pérez et al, 2013).
- In **Guatemala**, extreme poverty, low resources for primary health care, little physical activity, and poor diet make diabetes one of the **main causes of mortality** (Rosales, 2015).

Research Question

What are the perceptions, lifestyles and practices of the indigenous population of Guatemala regarding diabetes?



Photograph 1. Healer sharing his knowledge about plants and herbs to treat diabetes. Taken by: Liesl Cohn

Number of adults (20–79 years) with diabetes worldwide

North America & Caribbean

2045 63 million
2030 56 million
2019 48 million

↑ 33% increase

- 1 in 6 adults in this Region is at risk of type 2 diabetes
- 43% of global diabetes-related health expenditure occurs in this Region

South & Central America

2045 49 million
2030 40 million
2019 32 million

↑ 55% increase

- 2 in 5 people with diabetes were undiagnosed
- Only 9% of global diabetes-related health expenditure for diabetes is spent in this Region

Africa

2045 47 million
2030 29 million
2019 19 million

↑ 143% increase

- 3 in 5 people with diabetes are undiagnosed
- 3 in 4 deaths due to diabetes were in people under the age of 60

Middle East & North Africa

2045 108 million
2030 76 million
2019 55 million

↑ 96% increase

- 1 in 8 people have diabetes
- 1 in 2 deaths due to diabetes were in people under the age of 60

South-East Asia

2045 153 million
2030 115 million
2019 88 million

↑ 74% increase

- 1 in 5 adults with diabetes lives in this Region
- 1 in 4 live births are affected by hyperglycaemia in pregnancy

WORLD

2045 700 million
2030 578 million
2019 463 million

↑ 51% increase

Europe

2045 68 million
2030 66 million
2019 59 million

↑ 15% increase

- 1 in 6 live births are affected by hyperglycaemia in pregnancy
- The Region has the highest number of children and adolescents (0–19 years) with type 1 diabetes – 297,000 in total

Western Pacific

2045 212 million
2030 197 million
2019 163 million

↑ 31% increase

- 1 in 3 adults with diabetes lives in this Region
- 1 in 3 deaths due to diabetes occur in this Region

Graphic 1. Diabetes worldwide. Source: International Diabetes Federation. Web site: <https://diabetesatlas.org/data/en/world/>

Methodology

- **Qualitative** methodology.
- **Ethnographic** method.
- **Fieldwork** was carried out for a month.
- Research **techniques**: bibliographic review, **observation**, field diary and in-depth **interviews** with **45** people (doctors, nurses, patients with diabetes and healers).
- Visits to the health center, the public hospital and a private hospital in Atitlán to observe the **health services available** for the residents. Visits to markets and neighborhood to observe **the supply and demand of food**. Visits to cofradías, centers of Mayan spirituality, and houses of Mayan healers to learn about the **treatments and medicinal plants** they use.

Findings

- 10/20 years ago **diabetes** was **not that common** for indigenous and it was even considered a 'ladino disease'.
- Physicians attribute the **increase** in diabetes to the **sedentary lifestyle** and **poor diet**.
- Most diabetics consider the disease is **caused by emotional situations**. However, they are aware of the **relationship between diet and diabetes**, although they give more importance emotions.
- Most people don't have regular medical **check-ups** and go to health institutions until they feel **unwell**.
- For many doctors, **natural medicine** can be used more as a **preventive** or used in the early stages of the disease, but not in seriously ill patients.
- People complain that the **official health system** is very **expensive** and that doctors don't give personalized attention, which is why they **prefer** to go to **Mayan healers**.
- It is possible to **balance** the Western healthcare system with natural medicine, although natural remedies are seen more as a **complement** to drugs than to be effective on their own.

Conclusions

Most indigenous people combine **natural medicine with biomedical medicine** to treat **diabetes**. Physicians recognize the importance of Mayan knowledge and its contributions, although it's a partial acceptance that must still be promoted in **practice**. Healers are important in the **community** since many people come to them to seek to heal some condition, whether **physical or spiritual**, not only out of **respect** for their wisdom but because it's economically accessible and provides individualized care. Therefore, both Western knowledge and Mayan knowledge must be learned and used indiscriminately to **treat indigenous people** from diabetes

References

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