

Are there 200,000 and more traditional healers practicing in South Africa?

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RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Background

The promulgation of the Traditional Health Practitioners Act No 22 (2007) was guided to a great extent by the allegation that there were 200,000 and more traditional healers practicing in South Africa. This number had also reflected a great demand for their services. Regulation was thus in the early 2000s an immediate need to safeguard the public against malpractice of these practitioners.

Aims

The aim of this study is to determine if the allegation that there are 200,000 and more traditional healers practicing in South Africa is true.

Methods

This is an exploratory and descriptive study that makes use of an historical approach by means of investigation and a literature review. The emphasis is on using current documentation like articles, books and newspapers as primary sources to reflect on the thinking and opinions

around the numbers of traditional health practitioners in South Africa. Findings are represented in narrative form.

Results

The Traditional Health Practitioners Act No 22 (2007) was promulgated without applicable and appropriate needs analysis of traditional healers as healthcare practitioners by the public. The true number of traditional healers, to make it a viable and sustainable healthcare profession in South Africa, was never determined. The alleged number of 200,000 and more traditional healers was the untested motivator for the promulgation of the Act in 2007.

Conclusion

The allegation that there are 200,000 and more traditional healers practicing in South Africa could not be confirmed.

The true number of bona fide traditional healers in present-day South Africa seems insignificant.

It is of great importance that the official registration process of the South African traditional health practitioners is fully activated in 2017. Only then will clearance on the real number of traditional healers practicing in the country be obtained and can constructive decisions on the group's future be taken.

Key Words

Assumption, bogus, bona fide, membership, tertiary, unofficial, unregulated

What this study adds:

1. What is known about this subject?

The true presence of traditional healers in South Africa is under-researched and led to a lack of substantiated facts on it.

2. What new information is offered in this study?

This study presented evidence that the number of traditional healers is over-estimated and misleading.

3. What are the implications for research, policy, or practice?

The research-outcomes make the reason for the promulgation of Act No 22 (2007) and the statutory recognition of the traditional healer as a health practitioner questionable.

Background

The promulgation of the Traditional Health Practitioners Act No 22 (2007), which led to the statutory recognition of the traditional healers as *traditional health practitioners* in the South African health establishment, was based on and driven by various allegations, assumptions, thoughts, generalizations, statistics and other cultural and political information.

One of these motivators in the post-1994 new South African political dispensation was the chief allegation that there were at least 200,000 unregistered traditional healers practising in South Africa and who needed to be regulated. It was also alleged, in relation to these numbers, that there is a great need for traditional healers by the public. These views on the traditional healers are still today reflected in South African literature.^{1–7}

For the various healthcare providers, like the psychologists, nursing practitioners and the medical doctors particular, these new health practitioners, consisting of an alleged 200,000 and more in numbers, are also important as a possible healthcare competitor, while for the medical funds and schemes as well as the employers this newcomer means an extra financial burden.

Method

The research was done by means of a literature review. This method entails formulating a view base about which there is little information. The databases used were EBSCOHost, Sabinet online and various contemporary sources like news papers and reports for the period 1988 to 2016, articles from 1994 to 2014, books for the period 1990 to 2014 and government documents for the period 2007. These sources were consulted to reflect not only on the thinking, viewpoints and opinions of the present numbers of traditional health practitioners in South Africa, but also to obtain a future view on their numbers. The findings are offered in narrative form.^{8,9}

Results

The popular mid-1980s number of 200,000 and more traditional healers in South Africa

Nowadays reports state the number of traditional healers in South Africa is at least as 200,000, with some researchers put it even so high as 400,000. Research shows that this general outcome of 200,000 is seemingly based on mid-1980's publications, that on their turn was seemingly based on a 1983-estimation by the World Health Organization (WHO). No confirmation was or is obtained by researchers to confirm if the 200,000 outcome for South Africa is true, neither was research findings upgraded over the years with new data.^{1–7}

The present, popular data quoted in research on the numbers of traditional healers can clearly not be used to make a precise decision if the 200,000 is correct or incorrect. This unclearness needs further research and reviewing.

Membership of the Societies for Traditional Healers

One possible guideline to determine the true number of traditional healers in South Africa is the membership-count by traditional healer's societies. This seems again problematic because there is not a single non-compulsory body to register all the so-called traditional healers as a single group. Further registration is in terms of an official registration with the statutory body for traditional healers, namely the Traditional Health Practitioners Council of South Africa (THPCSA), at the moment not compulsory. Compulsory registration in terms of the Traditional Health Practitioners Act No 22 (2007) was only started in 2016.^{10,11}

Many of the traditional healers are organized and "licensed" at the moment in South Africa by more than 200 unofficial organizations or associations; organizations themselves that are sometimes only officially registered under the Companies Act as a business unity but not as a professional body. Depending on the strength and criteria, membership of organizations range from 10 to 1,000, with some traditional healers based regionally, provincially or nationally.^{10,11}

The *Traditional Healer's Organization* (THO) reflects 29,000 members, the *Traditional Healers of South Africa* (THSA) boasts about 350,000 members, while the national organizer of the THO estimates that there are about 183,000 traditional healers practising in South Africa. Hereto researchers quoted 185,477 to 400,000 traditional healers in South Africa.^{6, 13–16}

Statements, based on membership numbers, can clearly thus also not unconditionally be accepted as correct, for various reasons as researchers warn.^{11,17} The African

Technology Policy Studies (ATPS)^{17, p.30} reports: “It must be noted that certificates are not awarded on the basis of competence and there is no thorough scrutiny on the credentials of the individual before being awarded a certificate. This is simply done to increase the membership of the association to sustain it through the fees that is paid for registration and annual subscription”. This registration policy has resulted that many bogus traditional healers had obtained healer status and contribute to the 200,000 and more count.^{11,17}

Pretorius^{11, par.5}, in referring to the 200,000 alleged traditional healers in South Africa and the alleged population ratio versus traditional healers of 1:200, writes: “This apparently favourable ratio could, however, be deceptive, if the type and quality of care in the traditional sector is not taken into account. In the current economic climate and amid the concomitant unemployment, there is a market increase in the ranks of traditional healers, among whom there are, unfortunately, quite a number of charlatans. It is calculated that of the 80,000 persons practicing traditional healing in Gauteng, only about 10 per cent are bona fide healers”.

This means, if the alleged 200,000 number is true, at most only 20,000 qualify to be “real” traditional healers in terms of the *Pretorius-criteria*¹¹. Regarding the 200,000 alleged traditional healers, the ATPS¹⁷ emphasizes further that in the era of HIV/AIDS and other hard to cure diseases, the bogus practice of traditional healing is taken advantage of for the purposes of self-enrichment by people who are not at all “real” traditional healers. Further it seems that there is a contingent of bogus healers from East and West Africa who are counted into the assumed 200,000 South African traditional healers. Even the adjusted number of 20,000 as possible bona fide healers seems to be uncorrected and an over-estimate.^{11,17}

The various contamination names for the traditional healer are count-misleading

A further contamination factor in the determining of the present numbers of traditional healers in South Africa is that the names *traditional health practitioner, traditional healer, traditional health doctor, medicine-man* or *doctor* is also misleading. These are quasi-names that activists, propagandists, researchers, the government and the public are commonly used; clearly without understanding the real meaning of it. This encircling quasi-descriptive names make it possible for many people (possibly *even more* than the 200,000 alleged) to call and pride themselves traditional

healers, as various researchers already had demonstrated.^{2,11,17,18}

The name traditional healer is clearly a non-specific encircling name for various non-medical workers in South Africa. It is a mixture of indigenous spiritual, cultural and social work-types, totally outside the definition of practice, training or domain of any of the registered health professions like nurses, dentists, medical doctors, etc. This differentiation, especially when compared with the modern medical doctors who researchers and the public try to compare and identify with the traditional healer. A comprehensive study of career-literature describes also the traditional healers by many names. To name some of these personas: diviners, herbalists, traditional birth attendants or midwives, traditional surgeons, medicine-men, bonesetters, sorcerers, spiritual healers, home caregivers, traditional advice counsellors, holistic healers, faith healers, traditional doctors, spiritual practitioners, priests, psyche healers, traditional health clerks, diagnosticians.^{2,6,14,17-22}

These various classifications, naming and definitions make the grouping of persons working in the traditional healing as a single group, to can be counted under the descriptive name traditional healers, basically impossible.

Use of statistical formula to determine the numbers of South African traditional healers

A more statistical and descriptive approach is thus needed to get an idea of (a) who qualifies to be a traditional health practitioner, as the Traditional Health Practitioners Act No 22 (2007) tries to describes him/her as a professional entity and (b) the true number of the unregistered traditional healers practising in South Africa.

One way is to differentiate on the one side between (a) the quasi-healer without any type of school education and professional training and on the other side (b) the group who obtained a school-leaving certificate and/or attend tertiary training. This differentiation is done on the principle that all the statutory recognized healthcare practitioners practising in South Africa must fulfil to minimum education and training to assure that they are able and skilled to deliver with safety healthcare services to the public.

To obtain insight in to the present-day status of the traditional healer’s school-leaving certificate and/or his attending tertiary training, various South African articles, books and other publication-matter were consulted with little success. A Lesotho-study by the ATPS¹⁷ could be identified to give a trustworthy guideline to compare the

South African traditional healer's scholastic/tertiary qualifications for instance with that of the western medical doctor. In this study¹⁷ a population of 91 traditional healers against 108 users (beneficiaries) of traditional medicines were researched.

Above data reflects that only 2.2 per cent of traditional healers have some form of tertiary education or attend in some way a post-grade-12 institution. This tentative tertiary certification makes the traditional healers comparable to the minimum school-leaving level of the registered or regulated healthcare professions, namely Grade 12.

From this outcome, only 2.2 per cent of the alleged 200,000 traditional healers in South Africa are thus on a "comparable school leaving level" with the modern healthcare practitioners, especially the medical doctor, with who they are competing in the healthcare market and for a healthcare positioning. This means in terms of the classification of the ATPS¹⁷ (read together with the Pretorius-criteria¹¹) at most 4,400 (2.2 per cent of the alleged 200,000 traditional healers) really qualify to be classified as traditional healers in South Africa, although still with *certain limitations* in terms of final school-leaving certification. This group still mostly lacks the post-grade-12 three to eight years of tertiary training of the healthcare practitioner].¹⁷

If a stricter "tertiary education" classification, stretching over five to six years after grade 12, similar to the M.Tech (Homeopathy) or the MB.ChB (Medicine), is brought into account, the chance is good that the estimated 2.2 per cent of the ATPS¹⁷ can be halved further to an 1 per cent of bona fide healers or 2,200 in number with an assumed tertiary training of three and more years against the alleged 200,000 traditional healers.

Above findings are in line with the present total registration membership of more or less 4,000 registrations that the allied professions in South Africa had reached only after nearly 40 years of regulation (against the 4,400 to be "real" traditional healers) as calculated above. If only the present number of registered homeopaths, naturopaths and phytotherapists are taken into account after nearly 40 years of regulation, namely more or less 1,300 (against the 2,200 estimated bona fide traditional healers with some form of tertiary education), the outcome is still balancing.^{13,19,23}

Above gives a good indication of the low number of registrations of bona fide traditional healers that can be

expected in terms of the Traditional Health Practitioners Act No 22 (2007) if strict registration rules are followed.

The "real" or bona fide traditional healers in South Africa can further be calculated by a combination of the research of Pretorius¹¹ and the manifestos of various traditional healers organizations.^{12,24-26}

Pretorius¹¹ also doubts the trustworthiness of the alleged 200,000 traditional healers as quoted by researchers in South Africa, and, as the ATPS¹⁷ did, also the correctness of enrolled members as offered by the traditional healer organizations. Pretorius¹¹ calculation is that only 10 per cent of all the so-called traditional healers are bona fide healers.

With reference to the membership numbers, as stated by various traditional healer organizations, it seems only to be the Traditional Healers Organization (THO) of all the healer organizations which openly declared that they have only 29,000 members. They also give a clear reason why this number is 29,000 and not the massive numbers of the other organizations: namely, because they use some kind of selection criteria for registration. As such, the leaders of the THO^{12,24-26} allege they have sorted out to some extent the massive group of bogus healers by the following training and registration requirements: (a) own training of two years and mentorship as well as a further three years of part-time guidance and support; (b) to become a member of the THO already practicing traditional healers have to attend a one-day workshop to be introduced to the THO activities and a five-day workshop on traditional primary healthcare; (c) Persons who want to join the THO as healers must also produce a reference of good character.^{11,12,14,24-28}

If the criteria of "three years or more tertiary training" is made applicable on the 29,000 THO-members by using the 10 per cent-calculation of Pretorius,¹¹ only 2,900 "real" or bona fide healers are reflected. This outcome is in line with the estimated 2,200 of this study, based on the 1 per cent - criteria in terms of the ATPS¹⁷. The 2,900 seems even to correlate to a certain extent with the 2.2 per cent of the ATPS¹⁷-guideline that reflects 4,400 healers.

The 7:1 ratio-misled of traditional healers versus healthcare practitioners

A serious and misleading deception that spread direct out of the alleged 200,000 traditional healers assumption, is the habit to compare these untested number of an alleged 200,000 traditional healers specific with the total number of registered modern healthcare practitioners, especially medical doctors, in South Africa to support the allegation of 200,000 traditional healers in practice as true, as well as to

support the assumption that there is an enormous need for their services. Some researchers indeed had referred in the past to this anomaly and contradiction in research-references and ask for cautiousness in interpretations. It seems as if this warning was clearly ignored by the most of researchers in their promotion of the traditional healers after 1994 in New South Africa. The end is a research-falsification, used exclusively to strengthen the believe of the alleged number of 200,000 traditional healers as true, as well to portrait them in terms of these alleged numbers as prime role-players in the South African healthcare sector.^{6,11,17,18,22}

Earlier as well as present-day presentations on the healthcare statistics of South Africa reflect the alleged 200,000 traditional healers versus 30,000 medical practitioners, projecting a ratio of 7:1 in favour of the traditional healers. [More recent statistics on Africa as a whole reflects even a ratio of so high as 80:1 between the numbers of traditional healers when compared with modern medical practitioners].^{5,6,19,29-34}

Above outcomes support the view of a great demand for traditional healers, together with the existence of an alleged number of 200,000 and more traditional healers practicing in South Africa as a fact.

Hereto shows research that above comparisons and conclusions seem to be again manipulated, ignoring that there are in real live an enormous group of registered healthcare professions practicing and offering the same and better health services to the public as the alleged 200,000 traditional healers. It must further be emphasised that very few of the alleged group of 200,000 traditional healers are fulfilling the status-requirements of bona fide healers. These alleged 200,000 traditional healers must thus be compared with the total numbers of registered healthcare professions (like psychologists, pharmacists, doctors, allied professionals, dentists, nurses, welfare-practitioners, etc.) in South Africa. These practitioners have statutory recognition and advanced scientific and practice training in healthcare that are overall of a much higher standard than that of the traditional healers. The total number of registered healthcare professionals reflected for 2013-2014 was 259,025. The number of medical doctors were 38,236, dentists 5,560, qualified nurses/midwives 124,045, allied auxiliary practitioners 43,584, practicing pharmacists 4,562, psychologists 6,019, social welfare practitioners 8,078 and non-practicing health practitioners 28,941.²⁹⁻³¹

The above ratio-outcome of 7:1 for South Africa are clearly wrong and changes dramatically when the total number [*all types* registered with the Health Professions Council (HPCSA) and other Health Councils] of registered health professionals is taken into account, namely an alleged 200,000 traditional healers (*all types* seeing, that the term *traditional healer* can encircle also more than 20 kinds of traditional healers although Act No 22 only defined four) against 259,025 registered healthcare professionals (*all types*). The ratio dramatically changes to 1:1 (259,025:200,000), with even a small favouring of the registered or regulated healthcare professionals.^{2,11,21,34-38}

This outcome contradicts the strong demand of traditional healers as measured in terms of proportional numbers when comparing with all the registered healthcare practitioners.

When the groups are compared in terms of the total grouping of 259,025 qualified health professionals with the more trustworthy number of 4,400 selective “real” or bona fide traditional health practitioners (representing those 2.2 per cent with some tertiary training in terms of the APS¹⁷ guideline), the ratio is totally in favour of the already registered or regulated healthcare professions, namely a ratio of 59:1. When the 2,200 bona fide traditional healers (as calculated with the ATPS¹⁷-Pretorius¹¹- criteria), who are assumed to have more than three years of tertiary training, are compared alone with the number of registered medical practitioners of more or less 38,000, the ratio is 17:1 in favour of the medical practitioners.

Above finding basically nullifies the alleged need of traditional healers, as previously reflected by the ratio of 7:1 in favour of the traditional healers. Indirect it also challenge the allegation of the presence of 200 000 traditional healers in practice in South Africa. It seems that it support the viewpoint and opinion of this research that the bona fide traditional healers of South Africa is insignificant.

General South African Household Surveys: 2003–2013

The General Household surveys, especially because it represent the clients’ views and opinions, show a far lower presence of traditional healers active inside the South Africa healthcare sector.³⁹ It also reflects a constant decline in the usage of the traditional healer since 1990.³⁹

For the period 2008 and 2011 the average usages were respectively 1.2 per cent and 1.4 per cent of the traditional healer as reported by specific Black South Africans.^{7,39}

The national statistics of the General Household Survey of 2013 offer also very good insight into the possible number of bona fide traditional healers in South Africa. This survey's statistics reflect for the period 2004 to 2013 (10 years) the preferred healthcare professionals that the public first contact in times of medical urgency: For the 10 years, the preference of the traditional healer was only an average of 0.2 per cent against the medical doctor's average of 22.0 per cent.⁴⁰ This reflect a ratio of 1:110 or a percentage-comparison of only one traditional healer for every 100 doctors available in terms of the 2004 to 2013 statistics.⁴⁰

When this 2004–2013 statistics are transferred to the usage, availability and presence in the community of healthcare providers, it means that for the 39,000 medical doctors registered in 2013, there were only 390 traditional healers in practice.^{7,30,39} This is in line with the 1.4 per cent average usage for 2011 which reflects only 546 traditional healers in practice against 39,000 medical doctors in terms of the percentage comparison.^{7,30,39}

It is clear that in terms of above transformed-statistics that the South African traditional healers with a bona fide status – representing more trustworthy the true number of traditional healers of South Africa – are in terms of a strict selection criteria not more than 4,400. This number is a fraction of the untested, alleged 200,000 and more traditional healers reflected in the general literature on the South African traditional healing.

Discussion

It seems that the alleged number of 200,000 traditional healers practicing in South Africa is based on a WHO estimation of the 1960s. This untested figure became incorporated as true in research data and mind-set of researchers, activists and propagandists on South African traditional healing. These mal-thinking was supported and strengthened by various traditional healers, organisations with their inflated and doubtful numbers of members. Present-day findings opposed it strongly. It indicates the number of the South African traditional healers with true bona fide status not to be more than 4,400.

The traditional ratio of 7:1 reflected in general literature on the South African traditional healing, favouring traditional healers above medical doctors, is also contradicted by various new research-outcomes, making the need for the traditional healers in the South Africa society less prominent. It also dislodges the established belief of the presence of 200,000 traditional healers in practice in South Africa.

It is further clear that the definition *traditional health practitioner*, as inscribed in the Traditional Health Practitioners Act No 22 (2007), is undefined and insufficiently formulated. The present definition includes all kinds of non-formal practitioners, like caregivers, faith healers, priests, psyche-healers, etc. inflating the number of traditional healers in South Africa to be the alleged 200,000 and more.

Strength and limitations

Notwithstanding a lack of official South African documentation on traditional healing, the evidence obtained from contemporary and primary resources offered the opportunity to form objective viewpoints on the matter and to profile more clearly the traditional healer's position in terms of numbers and need by the public.

Although this study includes cross-sections of the population using traditional healers, it would benefits if it also includes people who are not sick, who are not visiting a specific hospital, clinic or who have not already visited a modern-day health practitioner or a traditional healer, to obtain further detail information on matters like the usage, numbers and popularity of traditional healers. This research could not fully fulfil to this requirement as a result of costs and manpower.

Conclusion

The present existence of an alleged 200,000 and more traditional healers practicing in South Africa could not be confirmed. The same lack of a present confirmation about the alleged 7:1 ratio in favour of the traditional healers against the medical doctor was also reflected.

The present profile of South African traditional healers as an uniform group of healthcare professionals lacks; even the Traditional Health Practitioners Act No 22(2007) fails to define precise the present professional status and position of traditional healers in the South African healthcare sector.

The authors believe that the existence of an alleged 200,000 traditional healers in present day South Africa are totally over-estimated and misrepresented in numbers in research and in public talk. We believe that the bona fide traditional healers are a small, insignificant group.

We believe also that it is of utmost importance that the registration of the traditional health practitioners in terms of the Traditional Health Practitioners Act No 22 (2007) is been activated as soon as possible and that the registration-process is fully completed in 2017. Only with precise and

descriptive statistics can the true number of traditional healers be mapped, as well as the viability and sustainability of the South African traditional healing be determined and constructive planning on its future be considered.

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