

AMC Health Systems and Cancer Research Division

***Traditional Beliefs and Cancer Care in Afghanistan:
Myths, Misunderstandings, and Medical Mistrust***

*Understanding the Role of Cultural Perceptions in Delaying Diagnosis and
Treatment*

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2. Introduction

Cancer remains a leading cause of death worldwide. While global public health systems have made strides in early detection, treatment, and survivorship, countries like Afghanistan face unique cultural and systemic challenges. Traditional beliefs deeply rooted in Afghan society often shape perceptions of disease and influence decisions around treatment. These beliefs, compounded by poor health infrastructure, create an environment where myths prevail, and medical mistrust flourishes.

3. Traditional Beliefs and Cancer: An Overview

Afghanistan's healthcare-seeking behavior is largely shaped by its tribal, religious, and cultural foundations. Many communities interpret cancer not as a biological disease but as a curse, divine punishment, or result of spiritual imbalance. In rural areas, patients often seek help from mullahs, spiritual healers, or local herbalists before ever visiting a doctor. Such approaches, while deeply respected, can delay diagnosis and reduce survival chances.

4. Common Myths and Misunderstandings

- **Cancer is contagious:** Some believe that being close to a cancer patient can spread the illness.
- **Cancer equals death:** The widespread notion that cancer has no cure leads to resignation and lack of action.
- **Only Westerners get cancer:** In remote villages, cancer is still seen as a foreign or non-Muslim illness.
- **Chemotherapy is fatal:** Negative experiences and lack of understanding about side effects lead people to fear treatment more than the disease.
- **Traditional remedies can cure cancer:** Herbal concoctions and religious amulets are often preferred over evidence-based treatment.

These myths create fear, isolation, and delay in seeking effective care.

5. Impact of Cultural Beliefs on Medical Trust

Afghans often equate Western medicine with invasive, costly, and untrustworthy interventions. Mistrust is further fueled by inconsistent care, lack of medical privacy, and the absence of communication in the local language. Additionally, some believe that accepting a cancer

diagnosis is equal to losing faith in divine will, which prevents open discussion and proactive treatment.

6. Patient Pathways: From Traditional Healers to Modern Clinics

For many Afghan patients, the first point of contact is not a doctor but a traditional healer or spiritual leader. Only when symptoms worsen—sometimes beyond treatable stages—do families turn to hospitals. By then, valuable time is lost. Often, even modern clinicians struggle to convince patients to follow through with treatment, especially when side effects are mistaken for worsening illness.

7. Barriers to Effective Cancer Care

- **Illiteracy and low health literacy**
- **Geographical distance to urban hospitals**
- **Gender barriers limiting women's access to healthcare**
- **Financial constraints and cost of medication**
- **Lack of culturally competent cancer education**
- **Fear of social stigma and isolation**

These barriers are compounded by poor policy implementation and limited oncology services nationwide.

8. Strategies to Bridge the Gap Between Tradition and Medicine

- **Community Health Workers:** Train local figures to serve as cultural mediators and health educators.
- **Faith-Based Messaging:** Work with religious leaders to dispel harmful myths using Islamic perspectives on medicine.
- **Culturally Relevant Campaigns:** Develop audio-visual materials in Dari and Pashto that demystify cancer and promote treatment.
- **Mobile Clinics:** Bring diagnosis and follow-up care to rural communities.
- **Partnerships with Traditional Healers:** Engage them in early detection and referral rather than confrontation.
- **Training for Oncologists:** Sensitize doctors to the socio-cultural realities of their patients.

9. Conclusion

Cancer in Afghanistan is not only a medical issue but a cultural and psychological one. Myths and medical mistrust delay diagnosis and treatment, worsening outcomes and eroding community trust in healthcare. To improve cancer care in Afghanistan, it is essential to address the cultural landscape with respect and creativity, working hand-in-hand with traditional frameworks rather than dismissing them.

10. Recommendations

1. Develop a national cancer awareness strategy rooted in cultural context.
2. Train health professionals in culturally sensitive communication.
3. Integrate cancer education into school curricula and mosque-based programs.
4. Establish partnerships between Ministry of Public Health and local NGOs.
5. Fund research on the intersection of traditional beliefs and cancer outcomes.
6. Build trust in oncology services through transparency, affordability, and accessibility.

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