

## **Despite Risks, Faith Endures in Traditional Afghan Cures**

**Author:** [Ahmad Shah](#)

Villagers often resort to folk medicine. Some live to regret it, others don't.

When Hajji Jarnail, 60, decided to turn to traditional methods to cure a long-term illness, his health took a turn for the worse.

Conventional medical treatment had failed to help, so an elderly friend advised him to cover himself in the skin of a freshly-slaughtered cow. Soon he found himself covered in spots, which he says nearly killed him, and he had to seek help from a qualified physician.

"When they took me to the doctor, he wouldn't treat me," said Jarnail, a resident of the Mandozai district of Khost region in southeast Afghanistan. "He said I wouldn't recover. He was very angry, but after my relatives pleaded with him, he gave me medicines."

Dr Jalal Faiz, the skin specialist currently treating Jarnail, said the animal-hide "cure" was highly dangerous.

"In fact, Jarnail was committing suicide, and it's a good thing they brought him to me. Spots had emerged on his body, which prepare the ground for infections to be transferred to the blood. His treatment will take a long time."

Dr Faiz said he had seen many patients suffering serious side-effects after trying this old-fashioned remedy.

Despite some modern medical facilities available in Afghanistan, traditional treatments are still widespread in more remote districts, and in villages where people have no access to health centres.

However, not only do these methods usually do little to help, they often make things worse, and can even lead to the patient's death.

In remote villages, barbers still perform services from circumcisions to tooth extractions, and people visit traditional bonesetters if they break or dislocate a limb.

A common treatment is to wear the skin of a freshly slaughtered cow, sheep or goat. People also believe that certain childhood illnesses can be treated by wrapping the sufferer in the stomach of a sheep, goat or calf. The belief is that the organ removes "bad blood" from the child.

Other treatments include using rabbit blood to help respiratory problems, wearing amulets, and consuming herbs.

The traditional healers include older women as well as men.

Alef Jana, a healer in the village of Motun, says she has treated sick children many times by wrapping them in the cleaned-out stomach of a freshly-slaughtered goat. While she could not explain how exactly this helped, she insisted it was beneficial.

"There weren't so many doctors or so much medicine in the past. We used to do this and God would heal them. Nowadays, people's beliefs have been damaged and they don't believe in most things," she said.

Jana described other remedies, such as the cure for a baby suffering from diarrhoea. The yolk of an egg was mixed with the seeds of a special plant, spread on a piece of fabric and placed on the soft spot of the baby's head.

Children suffering from pneumonia, she said, needed to be treated by having a warm mixture of salt fried in cooking oil rubbed on their chest and covered in plastic.

"They bring me children who have been taken to the doctors several times but haven't been healed," she added.

Dr Badshah Zar Abdali, a lecturer in medicine at the Sheikh Zayed university in Khost, said such traditional treatments were simply wrong, with no scientific basis. According to him, hundreds of people die from such practices every year across Afghanistan.

"Most patients are initially treated by those so-called village doctors or experts. They treat the patients wrongly until their situation gets out of hand. Then they're brought to hospital, but by this point the patient is between life and death. Most patients die in these circumstances," he said. "For instance, every year we

lose many people who've been bitten by snakes, because they are initially taken to those who claim to heal by praying. They waste the patients' time until they die, either on the spot or on the way to hospital."

Broken bones and dislocated joints are treated by bonesetters whose craft has been handed down through the generations. However, they usually have no scientific knowledge of anatomy.

Khiali Khan, a well-known bonesetter in the Kondi area of central Khost, operates out of a clinic in his home.

"People even come to me from Pakistan. I treat them and God heals them," he said with an air of confidence and pride. "This work depends on the [power] of the hands as well. Some bonesetters have an unlucky touch. Not only do they not treat their patients, they harm them. But my hands are very good."

He said he knew how to pull and set broken and dislocated limbs, and insisted he did a better job than trained doctors.

"When you go to the doctor in the hospital with a broken arm or leg, they immediately amputate it, whereas we treat them. What should people do with a science that harms them?" he said.

Dr Abdali said that extreme measures were sometimes needed to repair damage done by traditional bonesetters. Two or three people came to his private clinic each week with badly-set broken bones, he added.

"They brought a child from Zazi Maidan district to me a month ago," he recounted. "The bonesetter in the village had fastened his arm using pieces of wood. His arm had come together wrongly. It was looking like he would be left disabled. We broke the child's arm again and treated him."

On another occasion, he said, "They brought us a boy whose leg was fastened so tight by the bonesetter in the village that his circulation had stopped. There was no other solution apart from amputating his leg, and that's what we did."

Although complementary medicine is common across the world, and forms an accepted part of the treatment of disease, in Afghanistan it has not been codified and there is no academic centre for its study. Practitioners tend to operate on the basis of knowledge passed down through the generations, and are often illiterate.

Maulavi Mohammad Ibrahim, a traditional doctor in Khost, said he could treat all illnesses short of performing surgery.

In between seeing patients at his shop, he said, "I worked as an apprentice with a famous traditional doctor in Peshawar and I learned from him."

He added that his patients were happy with their treatment.

However, not everyone is pleased with their experience of traditional medicine.

Din Wadir Shah, a resident of central Khost who suffers from rheumatism, said that someone had suggested he try a traditional cure for his complaint.

"I took medicine the traditional doctor gave me, but when I used it the second time, I lost consciousness. I don't know what happened, but when I woke up, I was in hospital. They had pumped my stomach," he said. "I don't know why the government doesn't stop such individuals. Why does it allow them to treat people?"

Dr Hedayatollah Hamidi, the acting director of public health in Khost, said his department had carried out numerous public awareness campaigns about folk medicine and traditional doctors.

"We have arrested many self-styled doctors and medicine sellers," he said, adding that serious violations still took place in Khost.

**Ahmad Shah is an IWPR-trained reporter in Khost.**

**Location:** [Pakistan](#)  
[Afghanistan](#)

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/despite-risks-faith-endures-traditional-afghan-cures>