

Government Reins in Tajik Healers

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A tough new law means folk healers now need a license to practice in Tajikistan.

When doctors told Zebo Kholova she'd never have children, the 30-year-old Dushanbe resident turned her back on modern medicine.

Her marriage in trouble because she couldn't conceive, Kholova went to an elderly and illiterate folk healer for help, and on New Year's Eve gave birth to a son.

Kholova, not her real name, believes the traditional remedies provided by the healer Gulbakhor were responsible for the new addition to her family. For Gulbakhor, however, the happy news of the birth was marred by the knowledge that Kholova could be her last patient now a tough law regulating traditional healers has come into effect.

Under the new rules, healers must apply for a 40 US dollar license - about 10 times the monthly minimum wage - from the health ministry and pay taxes. Prices they charge will be regulated by the ministry, unlike the traditional system, which allowed patients to pay what they could afford, usually no more than three dollars.

Licenses will be granted only to those who have passed a ministry-approved course and who can prove a family history of folk healing.

Currently, there are about five licensed healers in Tajikistan - the rest work illegally.

"At my age, it's ridiculous to study the rudiments of folk medicine and run around gathering various documents. I'll probably have to refuse people or go to another town, although my fee is my only source of income, and I don't have the right to drive away patients who need me," said Gulbakhor.

Zebo Bakhromova, director of the National Centre of Eastern Medicine, which trains healers in traditional Chinese medicine, maintains the law will protect Tajiks from the proliferation of people fraudulently claiming to have healing powers.

"In recent years, charlatans have been popping up everywhere, posing as folk healers," Bakhromova said. "Currently around 300 charlatans have been detected, but in fact there are a lot more of them."

Media advertisements promising healers who will "tell fortunes and heal with cosmic energy", "remove curses and evil eyes and "heal all illness with karma" are commonplace in Tajikistan.

"We use these advertisements to track down charlatans and demand that they stop their activity," said the deputy director of the Centre of Eastern Medicine, Nazira Khojjeva.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and state-sponsored healthcare, Tajiks have been turning to healers in increasing numbers. A visit to a reputable doctor is beyond the financial means of many, meaning

almost every village in Tajikistan now has a booming industry in healers who attempt to cure through hypnosis, extrasensory perception, herbal medicines, prayers and incantations.

Critics say most are uneducated, unskilled and often make the situation worse.

“Frequently, after the negative consequences of treatment from healers, these deceived people are forced to turn to official medicine, which is no longer able to help these hopeless cases,” said Khojjeva.

Saodat, a 35-year-old resident of the Gissar region near Dushanbe, turned to a religious healer when she failed to become pregnant. A relative told IWPR that after various procedures and prayers, she fell ill and died on her way to hospital. Doctors diagnosed Saodat, not her real name, with cancer of the uterus and said they could have helped her had she come in earlier.

In the Lenin region near Dushanbe, the Centre of Eastern Medicine has asked district prosecutors to investigate reports that several people died when a local tractor driver-turned-healer tried to prove that hepatitis could be cured by eating the fat from a sheep’s tail.

Healers, however, maintain they offer a valuable service and complain the new law will ruin their livelihoods.

IWPR met Amir, a 30-year-old, who said he received the gift of prophecy at age seven and now diagnoses illness with the help of angels, as he dealt with a long line of patients.

However, he was recently visited by the police and taxation authorities, who ordered him to stop seeing patients, because he has no license and pays no tax.

“Can angels pay taxes?” Amir said. “Why should I pay money to the state from my tiny income? The state did not give me the ability to heal, and I have no other profession.”

Amir, not his real name, claims past patients have included law enforcement authorities, politician’s wives and doctors, many of whom are now trying to put him out of business.

“If laws in our country worked the way they do in civilised countries, I would agree with these conditions, but they are a farce – it’s simply bribery and extortion, when the lawmakers themselves make use of our services,” Amir said. “If they don’t leave me alone, I will go abroad, where I have been offered work for a long time.”

Gulnora Amirshoeva is IWPR’s editor in Tajikistan.

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