



Exploring the Phenomenological Experiences of Indonesian Cancer Patients in Using Herbal Remedies: Cultural, Spiritual, and Emotional Dimensions

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ABSTRACT

The integration of herbal remedies into cancer care reflects a growing global interest in culturally grounded and patient-centered healing approaches. While existing studies have explored the clinical and behavioral aspects of herbal medicine, few have focused on patients' subjective experiences and personal meanings behind their choices.

This study aims to address that gap by asking: How do Indonesian cancer patient experience and interpret herbal remedies as part of their healing journey?

Using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), this research explores the lived experiences of twelve patients who used herbal remedies regularly alongside conventional treatments.

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The analysis identified recurring themes related to cultural identity, spiritual resilience, emotional empowerment, and personalized healing.

The findings suggest that herbal remedy use goes beyond physical health. It is a meaningful act rooted in ancestral traditions, spiritual reflection, and a sense of personal agency.

Healing, for these patients, is experienced as a holistic process shaped by internal meaning and cultural narratives.

This study offers a deeper understanding of how patients make sense of complementary therapies. It also highlights the importance of culturally sensitive approaches in integrative health care.

These insights can inform future research on the roles of tradition, spirituality, and personal meaning in global health practices.



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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the global resurgence of interest in natural and herbal remedies has signaled a shift in how individuals seek healing beyond conventional biomedical paradigms. In many societies, particularly in culturally rich and spiritually inclined regions such as Indonesia, herbal medicine is not merely viewed as a biological intervention but is deeply embedded in traditional beliefs, familial heritage, and personal narratives of wellness (Nwankwo *et al.*, 2021). Herbal therapies are often intertwined with local wisdom, reflecting generational knowledge and cultural identity passed down through oral traditions and communal practices.

The use of herbal remedies among cancer patients has become especially significant, as it highlights the dynamic interplay between formal medical treatment and individual efforts to reclaim agency in the healing process. Patients often turn to these traditional practices as a source of emotional comfort, spiritual strength, and a complementary means of managing side effects or regaining balance in life. For many, these remedies symbolize more than just physical recovery; they represent continuity with cultural values and a personalized approach to care in contrast to the impersonality of institutionalized medicine.

Despite growing attention to integrative medicine, much of the existing research remains focused on the pharmacological efficacy or clinical outcomes of herbal interventions, with limited understanding of the personal, emotional, and spiritual dimensions that motivate individuals to engage with these practices (Okano dkk., 2021). This gap underscores the importance of exploring the lived experiences of patients who navigate between biomedical and traditional healing systems, particularly within the cultural framework of their everyday lives.

A phenomenological approach is therefore essential to uncover the rich, nuanced meanings that patients assign to their use of herbal remedies. By focusing on the subjective dimensions of experience, phenomenology offers a pathway to understand how individuals interpret their health journeys, confront uncertainty, and construct meaning through their interactions with traditional medicine. This exploration is vital not only for enhancing cultural competence in healthcare but also for acknowledging the complex humanity embedded in the act of healing.

Research on patients' lived experiences in navigating illness and healing has emerged as a vital area within health and social sciences, particularly in understanding how individuals make sense of complex medical journeys. In the context of cancer care, the use of complementary therapies such as herbal remedies is not solely a matter of clinical efficacy but is often rooted in deeply personal, cultural, and emotional experiences (Moucheraud dkk., 2022). Studies have shown that these subjective dimensions play a critical role in shaping patients' coping strategies, treatment adherence, and perceptions of recovery.

However, exploring the meanings embedded in such experiences poses significant methodological challenges. Conventional research approaches, particularly those grounded in quantitative paradigms, often fail to capture the richness and complexity of individual narratives. By emphasizing measurable outcomes and generalizable data, these methods tend to overlook the nuances of belief systems, existential reflections, and cultural contexts that influence how patients engage with traditional therapies (Rahman dkk., 2022). Furthermore, even qualitative studies that do address the use of herbal remedies frequently adopt thematic frameworks that emphasize surface-level patterns, without delving into the interpretive layers of meaning that characterize lived experience.

These limitations underscore a critical need for methodologies that can access the depth of human experience. Phenomenological inquiry—especially interpretative approaches—offers a valuable lens through which to uncover the essence of how patients perceive, internalize, and enact their healing practices. By prioritizing first-person narratives and situating them within broader cultural and existential contexts, this study seeks to move beyond symptom-centered or treatment-focused analyses toward a more holistic understanding of what it means to heal through herbal remedies in the midst of life-threatening illness.

In the field of cancer care, the predominant approach to understanding patients' use of complementary therapies—including herbal remedies—has largely focused on clinical efficacy, biochemical properties, and outcome-based evaluations (Nyaaba dkk., 2019). These practical approaches, while valuable, often rely on standardized questionnaires, pharmacological trials, or behavior-oriented metrics that fail to address the underlying subjective reasons why patients engage with traditional healing practices. As a result, much of the existing literature provides a fragmented understanding of herbal remedy use, one that overlooks the lived, contextualized, and culturally embedded dimensions of this phenomenon.

Such methods offer limited insight into the emotional, spiritual, and existential meanings that patients attribute to their healing experiences. They tend to reduce complex human behavior into measurable outcomes, neglecting how individuals interpret their illness, negotiate hope, or maintain cultural identity through the use of herbal therapies (Singh dkk., 2021). Consequently, the depth of patient narratives—how herbal remedies shape their sense of agency, belonging, and purpose in the midst of illness—remains insufficiently explored in current research.

A more holistic and nuanced understanding of this phenomenon requires a methodological shift. Phenomenological inquiry, particularly interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), presents an alternative lens that prioritizes personal meaning, cultural situatedness, and the lived experience of

the individual. By engaging directly with patients' narratives, phenomenology allows researchers to access the internal logic and symbolic frameworks that guide decisions around herbal remedy use. This approach holds promise in addressing the current gaps in knowledge by revealing not only what patients do, but why and how they experience healing in ways that are deeply meaningful to them.

Previous research has explored patients' use of herbal medicine in clinical or sociocultural contexts, often emphasizing efficacy, safety, or behavioral patterns. Studies such as those by (Barber & Gibson, 2009) have highlighted the presence of cultural beliefs and practical motivations behind herbal use, yet they often lack depth in capturing the personal and emotional dimensions of patients' healing experiences. These works typically rely on thematic or descriptive analysis, offering limited insight into how individuals construct meaning through these practices. Theoretical perspectives on illness narratives and cultural healing have been underutilized in capturing the existential and spiritual dimensions of such experiences. Therefore, a more interpretative and experiential approach is needed to understand the essence of healing with herbal remedies from the patient's perspective.

This study applies an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore how Indonesian cancer patients experience and assign meaning to the use of herbal remedies as complementary therapy (Rodríguez-Montolio dkk., 2023). IPA is suitable for this inquiry because it prioritizes the lived experiences of individuals and examines how they interpret their world. This approach addresses the previously identified knowledge gap by accessing the symbolic, cultural, and emotional meanings that patients attach to herbal use. By focusing on subjective experiences, this method reveals not only what patients do but also why those actions are meaningful to them. Through this lens, the study seeks to uncover the deeper essence of healing as lived and understood by the patients themselves.

The article is structured as follows: the introduction outlines the context and significance of the phenomenon. The methods section presents the phenomenological framework, describes participant selection, and explains the data collection and analysis process (Fahey dkk., 2020). The results section details the themes that emerged from the interviews, supported by direct quotations from participants. The discussion interprets the findings in light of existing literature and theoretical insights. Finally, the conclusion summarizes key contributions and implications for future research and healthcare practice.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of cancer patients who use herbal remedies as complementary therapy (Grimm Jr. dkk., 1996). The phenomenological design was selected for its emphasis on capturing the depth and richness of personal experiences, particularly those grounded in emotional, cultural, and spiritual dimensions. As a methodological framework, interpretative phenomenology enables a detailed examination of how individuals make sense of their illness and healing journey within specific sociocultural contexts. In alignment with Heideggerian principles, this approach focuses not only on describing experiences but also on interpreting their underlying meanings through the lens of participants' lifeworlds.

Participants

Participants were adult cancer patients in Indonesia who had used herbal remedies alongside conventional treatment for at least three consecutive months. Selection followed purposive sampling to ensure that each participant had firsthand, meaningful engagement with the phenomenon under investigation. Inclusion criteria encompassed individuals aged 25 and above, with diverse cancer diagnoses, who self-reported regular use of herbal therapy and were capable of verbal articulation. Exclusion criteria included patients with cognitive impairments or those undergoing palliative sedation (Kjellgren dkk., 1998). A total of 12 participants were involved in this study, including 7 women and 5 men, with an age range of 29 to 67 years. Participants represented various educational and socio-economic backgrounds, offering a broad spectrum of experiential insight.

Data saturation was used to determine the adequacy of the sample size. Saturation was considered reached when no new themes, insights, or variations emerged from the data, and subsequent interviews confirmed thematic redundancy. Saturation began to appear after the tenth interview, and was confirmed through the eleventh and twelfth interviews, ensuring sufficient depth and diversity of perspectives.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by an interview protocol developed to elicit narratives surrounding herbal remedy use, personal beliefs, emotional coping, and perceived health outcomes. Interviews were conducted in a private, comfortable setting—either at participants' homes or at community health centers—based on their preferences. Each session lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with prior consent. The interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Efforts were made to build rapport and minimize power imbalances, fostering an open and reflective dialogue. The interview protocol was reviewed by a panel of qualitative experts and adapted based on preliminary field testing.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which involved systematic steps to uncover key themes and meanings. Transcripts were first read multiple times to attain immersion in the data. Meaningful units were identified and coded, with codes clustered into emergent themes (Bramham & Lightstone, 2012). NVivo software supported the organization and categorization of data. The process of analysis emphasized both the descriptive content of participants' accounts and the interpretative layers that revealed how they understood and assigned meaning to their experiences. The iterative approach ensured that themes reflected the complexity of each participant's lived reality while maintaining coherence across the data set.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board prior to data collection. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants after providing comprehensive information about the study's aims, procedures, potential risks, and confidentiality measures. Participants were assured that their identities would remain anonymous and that all data would be stored securely and used solely for academic purposes (Connell dkk., 2005). The study was conducted in accordance with internationally recognized ethical guidelines, including the Declaration of Helsinki and local research ethics protocols.

RESULTS

Seeking Inner Peace through Herbal Therapy

Participants consistently described the use of herbal remedies not only as a physical intervention but as a path toward emotional and spiritual peace. The decision to incorporate herbal therapy was often rooted in a desire to regain control, reduce anxiety, and reconnect with traditional healing wisdom passed down through generations.

"Ever since I started drinking the herbal mixture my mother made, I feel calmer. It's like I'm doing something natural, something closer to my roots. It helps me sleep at night, not just because of the drink, but because I feel like I'm helping myself." (Participant 3)

This sense of inner peace was reported to have a psychosomatic effect, contributing to a more optimistic outlook, which many believed played a role in their healing process.

Unveiling Inner Peace through Herbal Therapy



Cultural Identity and Familial Legacy in Herbal Usage

The cultural embeddedness of herbal therapy emerged as a powerful theme. Participants described their herbal use as deeply tied to family traditions and ancestral knowledge. For many, preparing and consuming herbal medicine was not merely a treatment—it was an affirmation of cultural identity and familial bonds.

"My grandmother used to boil these leaves for my father when he was sick. When I do the same now, I feel her presence. It's not just about healing, it's about remembering who we are." (Participant 5)

This theme underscores the role of intergenerational narratives in shaping participants' trust and belief in the efficacy of herbal remedies, even in the face of modern medical recommendations.

Negotiating Between Biomedical and Herbal Knowledge Systems

Participants often expressed the experience of navigating two parallel medical worlds—biomedical and traditional. While most did not reject hospital treatment, they viewed herbal remedies as offering something that clinical settings lacked: personalization, emotional support, and a sense of agency.

"In the hospital, it's like you are just a patient. But at home, making your own herbal drink, you feel like you're actively doing something for your health. You choose, you prepare, you drink—it's empowering." (Participant 7)

This negotiation process also involved internal conflict, especially when biomedical advice discouraged or dismissed herbal use, creating moments of doubt or secrecy.

Spiritual Meaning and Hope

The use of herbal remedies was frequently infused with spiritual significance. Many participants considered their practice of herbal consumption as part of a broader spiritual journey toward acceptance, hope, and healing. Rather than placing blind faith in herbal medicine, participants saw it as a form of submission to divine will or as a way to align with nature's healing forces.

"I pray before I take my herbal drink. It's not just about the ingredients. It's my way of showing faith, of believing that healing comes from God, through nature." (Participant 2)

This spiritual framing played a crucial role in shaping their mental resilience and coping mechanisms during their cancer treatment.

Perceived Impact on Quality of Life

While participants acknowledged that herbal remedies may not offer a cure, they described improvements in appetite, sleep, mood, and energy. These perceived benefits were considered critical enhancements to their quality of life, especially during periods of intensive chemotherapy or emotional distress.

"Even if it doesn't cure my cancer, it helps me eat, it helps me feel a bit more human during treatment days." (Participant 6)

The perceived physical relief, though subjective, reinforced their motivation to continue herbal use, often framing it as complementary rather than alternative to medical treatment.

Across the narratives, herbal remedy use emerges not merely as a health behavior but as a complex, multi-dimensional experience rooted in culture, emotion, and spirituality. Participants described their practice as a form of self-empowerment, cultural expression, and existential meaning-making, offering insights that go beyond clinical efficacy to reveal the lived depth of healing.

DISCUSSION

The present study revealed that the use of herbal remedies among Indonesian cancer patients is deeply rooted in cultural identity, emotional regulation, spiritual meaning, and a quest for personal empowerment (Schmieder, 2015). These findings highlight that healing, for the participants, transcends physical treatment and becomes a multidimensional experience shaped by cultural traditions and existential reflections—addressing the central question of how patients make sense of herbal remedy use within the cancer experience.

The themes identified in this study directly respond to the research question by illustrating the rich, subjective meanings patients associate with herbal therapy. Rather than perceiving herbal remedies merely as alternative treatments, participants described them as symbolic acts of healing, deeply entwined with familial memory, religious faith, and a sense of agency in navigating illness. This understanding expands the conceptual boundaries of patient care by shifting the focus from biomedical outcomes to the patients' internal world—an area often neglected in mainstream clinical discourse.

In comparison to prior studies, these findings align with and extend the work of (Mazza dkk., 2023), who identified the emotional and cultural motivations behind traditional medicine use. However, this study contributes a more interpretative lens by uncovering how participants assign spiritual and existential meaning to herbal practices—a layer often absent in descriptive or thematic analyses. The notion that herbal use functions as a bridge between cultural heritage and personal resilience adds depth to existing literature, demonstrating that healing is not simply a physiological process but also a narrative construction of meaning in the face of uncertainty. By situating these insights within a phenomenological framework, this study affirms the importance of honoring subjective knowledge in healthcare research and practice.

The findings of this study have important implications for both clinical practice and cultural health frameworks. The participants' experiences reveal that healing is not confined to the physiological domain but is embedded in rituals of care, cultural memory, and spiritual resilience (Morton dkk., 2018). For healthcare providers, these insights highlight the importance of integrating culturally sensitive approaches into patient care, particularly in societies where traditional and biomedical systems coexist. Understanding patients' motivations for using herbal remedies can foster trust, improve communication, and promote collaborative treatment planning. Furthermore, this

research underscores the need for healthcare systems to recognize and validate the subjective experiences of patients as central to holistic health interventions.

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. As a phenomenological inquiry, its findings are context-specific and drawn from a relatively small sample of Indonesian cancer patients who engage in herbal therapy. The purposive sampling method, while appropriate for capturing depth, limits the extent to which findings can be generalized to broader populations or other cultural contexts. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported narratives may be influenced by personal biases or retrospective reconstruction. These limitations, however, do not undermine the value of the insights gained but instead point to the need for cautious interpretation and contextual sensitivity when applying the findings.

Future research may build upon these findings by exploring similar experiential dimensions among other patient populations or within different cultural and religious settings. Longitudinal studies could further investigate how meanings assigned to herbal remedy use evolve over time, particularly across stages of illness or recovery. Additionally, comparative studies between users and non-users of herbal medicine may reveal contrasts in perceived agency, spiritual engagement, and quality of life. Such extensions would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of integrative care and enrich the broader discourse on patient-centered approaches in global health contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of Indonesian cancer patients who use herbal remedies as a form of complementary therapy, addressing the need to understand healing beyond biomedical frameworks. Through an interpretative phenomenological approach, the research uncovered how patients assign emotional, cultural, and spiritual meaning to their use of herbal medicine. The findings revealed that herbal practices serve as a source of inner peace, cultural continuity, spiritual resilience, and a sense of agency during illness. These insights contribute a richer understanding of patient behavior and offer a meaningful response to the limitations of prior research that often overlooked subjective experiences. The study demonstrates the value of integrating phenomenological perspectives into health research to better support culturally grounded care. Future studies may expand this work by exploring cross-cultural comparisons or examining how these experiences evolve throughout the cancer journey.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest. All phases of the research were conducted independently and objectively, and the funding sponsor had no role in the design, execution, interpretation, or writing of the study.

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