

# Exploration of the Use of Traditional Healers Among Nursing Students in Podlasie, Poland

Kamil K. Hozyasz

*Institute of Nursing and Midwifery, Faculty of Health Sciences, John Paul II University in Biala Podlaska, Poland*

**Received** February 24, 2025  
**Accepted** May 13, 2025  
**Published** August 31, 2025

**\*Corresponding author:**

Kamil K. Hozyasz, Institute of Nursing and Midwifery, Faculty of Health Sciences, John Paul II University in Biala Podlaska, Poland

**E-mail:**  
khozyasz@gmail.com

©2025, Hozyasz, KK

This is an Open Access article published under a Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-ND 0.4) license.



## ABSTRACT

Complementary and alternative medicine includes a broad set of health practices that are not part of conventional medicine. An interesting example of such a practice is the activity of folk healers called whisperers in Poland. Unfortunately, whisperer practices have not been studied from a biomedical perspective. In my own cross-sectional study, conducted in 2022 with the participation of nursing students from southern Podlasie, Poland, it was documented that the memory of whisperers is still alive. Of the 58 respondents, 27 (46.6%) had friends who used the help of whisperers, and seven nursing students (12.1%) personally benefited from such help in childhood. In Eastern Europe activity of traditional folk healers has not completely disappeared.

**Keywords:** Traditional healers, Prayers, Recitations, Nursing students, Podlasie

## Introduction

### *Complementary and alternative medicine in Poland and other Western countries*

In Western countries, the use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) has increased in recent decades [1,2]. Compared to other Western countries, Poland is distinguished by the currently low use of CAM and, at the same time, a rich tradition of using medicine from culturally and geographically distant countries and the occurrence of unique native folk healing largely based on spiritual influence. The study of traditional, alternative and complementary medicine provider use in the past 12 months based on a cross-sectional project using face-to-face interviews from the Health and Healthcare Module of the International Social Survey Program, 2011-2013, showed large country differences: France and Australia – 35%, United Kingdom – 24%, USA – 21%, Czech Republic – 20%, Bulgaria – 7%, and the lowest among 32 analysed countries in Poland - 6% [3]. In 2014, CAM use in Poland was twice as low as the average in European countries [2]. In 2012, von Ammon et al. [1] estimated that CAM provision in the European Union was maintained by approximately 305,000 registered

medical doctors and non-medical practitioners, a few of them in Poland. The average value for herbal therapists is 6.5 per 100,000 inhabitants; in Poland, this value is <1 [1]. Surprisingly, Poland is considered the cradle of the exploitation of traditional Chinese and Tibetan medicine in Europe [4,5]. Before World War II, a popular science magazine called “Lekarz tybetański” (“Tibetan Doctor”) was published in Warsaw, which preceded the explosion of interest in Tibetan medicine in the West in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century [6].

### *The tradition of whisperers*

The results of an online survey using the Polish adaptation of Quandt et al.’s International Questionnaire to Measure the Use of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (I-CAM-Q) within 38 thematically different groups on Facebook were recently published [7]. In the last 12 months, 85 (16.2%) and 19 (3.6%) of the 524 participants (sick/healthy; 83.4%/16.6%) used the help of a spiritual healer and a native whisperer, respectively. People with only primary education more often use whisperer services, while among respondents with higher education, the probability of using spiritual healers and other CAM providers increases [7]. Unfortunately, this study did not indicate the

respondents' geographical locations. To date, many folk healers called *szeptucha* (for a female healer) and *szeptuch* (for a male healer) operate in the Podlasie and Lublin regions, located near the Belarusian border (eastern Poland) [8,9]. In English, *szeptucha/szeptuch* would be close to the word "whisperer". The main tool in the fight against the disease is spiritual in nature and specially selected whispered prayers and spells in local dialects, gestures, and props, such as tissues, bunches of herbs, lined tow, sheep wool, animal dander, beeswax, ash, and salt have an auxiliary effect [8,10]. In a room with Christian cult images and candles, people seeking help are listened to, undergo rituals, and sometimes receive recommendations for performing specific activities in the future. Usually, the healer makes a sign of the cross many times. Over the last 300 years, at least 45 icons and Marian paintings have become famous for their miracles in Podlasie [11]. For the inhabitants of this area, famous cult images had universal and supra-confessional values. A religious denomination or the status of a non-believer does not constitute any restriction in using the help of a whisperer, who is most often of Orthodox faith. One of the distinctive elements of Orthodoxy among the Eastern Slavs is the synthesis of pre-Christian magic and religion [9,12,13]. Most whisperers are postmenopausal women with elementary education and farming experience [10]. In the Polish ethnographic discourse on whisperers, their similarity to Siberian shamans in mediating between the sacred and profane is raised [8]. Faced with the end of their lives, whisperers try to find a successor, usually their own child or a member of the extended family [10]. Therefore, the presence of whisperers in some rural regions of Poland may be regarded as a consequence of cultivating tradition, and not as an emerging way to provide or search for healing services. Little is known about the use of whisperers in the Polish population. In Podlasie, in circles of local intelligentsia, administrative authorities, and especially the higher clergy, the presence of folk healers in the community is treated as a shameful secret [9,10]. Apart from well-known whisperers, there are also healers who pray to the needs of their neighbors/recommended people and avoid publicity and curiosity.

### Research gap and study aim

Opinions expressed about the use of whisperers' help as a manifestation of a lack of education, superstition, and civilizational backwardness do not support the constructive interests of medical professionals [9]. Nurses play a vital role in healthcare systems, directly influencing a holistic therapeutic relationship with the patient and their family. The holistic approach involves evaluating a patient as an individual whole, including his or her physical, mental,

spiritual, and sociocultural dimensions. Openness to CAM can facilitate understanding of patients' needs to go beyond conventional (Western) medicine [14]. This study aimed to determine whether nursing students and those around them use the help of whisperers in southern Podlasie.

### Methods

In southern Podlasie with mixed ethnoses, there is only one university that educates nurses. In January 2022, all second-year nursing students from John Paul II University in Biała Podlaska were invited to participate in the study. After agreeing to participate, students received an anonymous questionnaire that included two sets of questions. The first set of 4 questions was designed to gather demographic data, including the participants' age in years, gender (female/male), and parents' residence, and the second set of 10 questions was specifically related to the use of special diets, homeopathic drugs, and using the help of whisperers. The study participant was expected to provide a "yes" or "no" answer, with some questions being asked to complete the information with a positive answer. Participation was voluntary and fully anonymous. As the activity was part of a curricular exercise and did not involve sensitive data or patient interaction, formal ethics approval was not required.

### Results

Of the 60 potential participants, 58 (96.7%) completed the questionnaire. Nine out of ten nursing students came from Podlasie (Table 1). In the family of every fourth student, there was the practice of using homeopathic medicines (Table 2). The parents of seven students practiced storing water at home from a source considered to have healing properties. 19% of students were on a diet during the study period. Over 30% of nursing students' parents sought help from a whisperer. Among the students, 17.2% reported that a whisperer was known to be practicing within a radius of 20 km (approximately 12.5 miles) from their parental residence. Only one student declared that he used whispering services as an adult, but 12.1% of the students (two males and five females) used it as children (Table 2). The parents of all students for whom whisperers' help was used in childhood also used CAM themselves. In the families of four of these students (four of seven), homeopathic medicines were used, but only in one family (one of seven), special healing water was stored. Four of the seven students who had seen whisperers as children were on a special diet at the time of the study. Almost half of the students had friends who used whisperer assistance (Table 2).

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of nursing students

No, n	58
Females/males n (%)	52 (89.7)/6 (10.3)
Mean age $\pm$ SD, years	25.9 $\pm$ 7.6
The place of residence of the student's parents, village/city n (%)	34 (60.7)/22 (39.3) <sup>1</sup>
Parents' residence in Podlasie/outside Podlasie n (%)	50 (89.3)/6 (10.7) <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Two students did not answer this question

<sup>2</sup> Two students did not answer this question

**Table 2.** Diet during the survey and the use of whisperers' help by students and people around them

Limiting lactose intake n (%)	4 (6.9)
Special diets n(%)	11 (20.0)
vegetarian n (%)	2 (3.4)
gluten-free n (%)	2 (3.4)
low-FODMAP n (%)	1 (1.7)
eco, extremely restrictive n (%)	1 (1.7)
high-protein n(%)	2 (3.4)
low-protein n (%)	1 (1.7)
low-carbohydrate n (%)	2 (3.4)
Use of homoeopathic medicines in the student's family n (%)	15 (25.9)
Storing water from a healing spring in the student's family home n (%)	7 (12.1)
Personal use of a whisperer as a child n (%)	7 (12.1)
Personal use of a whisperer as an adult n (%)	1 (1.7)
Having parents using the help of a whisperer n (%)	18 (31.0)
Having friends using the help of a whisperer n (%)	27 (46.6)
A whisperer who lives not more than 20 km from the student's parents' home n (%)	10 (17.2)

## Discussion

Data collected from nursing students indicated the popularity of whispering services in southern Podlasie. Most of the students themselves did not decide to use this CAM method, but almost half of their friends had such an experience. A study of emergency medical students from Podlasie conducted just before the COVID-19 pandemic found the same percentage of family members and friends using the whisperer's help (30.2% and 51.2 %, respectively) [15]. Ethnographic studies have documented the presence of whisperers in every larger village in Podlasie in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries [10]. In 2020, every fourth paramedic student from Podlasie declared that a whisperer was known to be practicing within 20 km of his/her parental residence [15]. A study by Kemppainen et al. [2], which utilized data from the European Social Survey (edition 2.0, 2014), showed that the most popular CAM treatment was massage therapy, used during the last 12 months by 11.9% of the adult European population, followed by homoeopathy (5.7%), osteopathy (5.2%), and herbal treatments (4.6%). Only 1.3% of the population reported spiritual healing. According to WHO estimates, in 2015, depressive disorders occurred in 322 million people worldwide, and in the logistic regression models, mind-body care was the only CAM modality associated with depression treatment [2]. Sadness and emotional disorders are often indicated as reasons for visiting whisperers [10]. The small percentage of vegetarians in the surveyed student population is not surprising. A

recent study of randomly selected Polish adults aged >20 years who participated in the National Multicentre Health Survey showed only 0.16% vegetarians, 7.4% flexitarians, and 92.4% omnivores [16]. This may be surprising; at the beginning of the 21st century, access to a vegetarian diet was not considered a right for even Buddhist prisoners in Poland [17].

Attributing special healing properties, not in the sense of a special physico-chemical composition, but rather of origin from a place with a special location, to water from springs has a long history [18,19]. In only one case, a family seeking help for their child from a local folk healer had the custom of storing such water at home. Homoeopathy, despite the accompanying scientific controversy [20], was often used by both nursing students' families, with or without the help of whisperers. Self-medication is common in Poland, and homeopathy is a CAM method that makes it easy to implement [21].

A traditional form of healing, whispering activity, has been preserved in Podlasie and the Lublin region in Poland, which are agricultural in nature and have mixed ethnoses [10,22]. Taking into account the frequent use of whispering services by friends of surveyed students, seeking the help of whisperers is not a niche relic and seems to have the features of a lifestyle element even among young people from Podlasie. It is noteworthy that introducing topics related to local traditions not only makes classes with students more

attractive but also gives the opportunity to make interesting observations. Unfortunately, this type of healing related to religion worldwide is considered unworthy of detailed documentation and seeking a deeper understanding [14]. On the one hand, the occurrence of healing practices that have been continued for generations in selected families and the continued massive use of their services in Europe in the 21st century should be considered a very interesting research topic. On the other hand, there are no biomedical studies on Polish whisperers in the scientific literature, and it is vain to look for studies on whisperers' backgrounds and in-depth accounts of people who used healers' help and are convinced of its effectiveness. Research on the impact of prayer on health remains an open methodological challenge [23]. Whispered prayers and formulas, as well as accompanying rituals, are worth recording and analysing, not only as a form of cultural heritage. Intonation, melodiousness, rhymes, repetitions, and rituals that redirect the attention of the person using the healer's help can be tools of influence [24-26]. Rhyming couplets are known as an important pillar of Sufi influence on mental and physical health [27,28]. Healing rituals are observed in typical medical settings. Van der Geest [29] interestingly presented this, emphasising the overlap between the technical activities of medical professionals and their other interactions with the patient in the work titled "Hospital care as liturgy: reconsidering magic, science and religion".

In Poland, there is a governmental ranking of scientific journals, which is slightly or sometimes not at all related to the impact factor, but as such, largely determines the development path of scientists. Although 38.2% of senior doctors and 13.6% of young doctors do not agree with the statement that CAM has a placebo effect, and three out of four doctors point to the advisability of scientific research on the effectiveness of CAM [30], none of the CAM journals have a score that would translate into the scientific development of the publishing person highly desired by the authorities in Poland. Olchowska-Kotala and Barański [30] suggested that the opinions of senior doctors regarding CAM and conventional medicine have been influenced by their clinical experience. The issue of CAM is rarely addressed by researchers in Poland [30,31]; however, whisperers from the Podlasie and Lublin regions have not received such in-depth analysis as similarly active Italian folk healers from Lucania [32].

### Recommendations

It would be valuable to further research the use of CAM, including whisperers, in other larger population groups in southern Podlasie, enabling the use of robust statistical methods. The inclusion of other students from other fields of study may have provided a more in-depth view of their use of whisperers' help. The results obtained regarding nursing students' parents in my study (31% sought a whisperer's help) suggest the

possibility of collecting interesting observations when examining this group. It is worth encouraging people who have sought the help of whisperers to make an effort to write down their memories.

### Limitations of the study

Although the results of the present study show important directions for understanding the phenomena of whisperers in Podlasie, they are not free from limitations. The obvious limitation of our study is a relatively small sample size, which limits the general ability to interpret crude results and conduct reliable statistical analyses. An additional limitation is that participant characteristics such as anxiety, depression, and stress were not assessed. Unfortunately, no attempt was made to verify whether the only case of disclosing the decision to use the help of a whisperer by a study participant was not a result of concealing such information. The research tools used were self-reported measures; therefore, only the subjective assessment of participants was examined. On one hand, self-report questionnaires are inexpensive and easy to administer, but on the other hand, we have limitations in that participants may be poor responders. One solution may be to combine qualitative and quantitative methods within the study. However, this study has some notable strengths. The participants were homogeneously recruited from only one higher education institution. Almost all second-year nursing students agreed to participate in the study, and the response rate was very high (96.7%). The population under investigation was in the majority from the same rural area.

### Conclusions

The information obtained from the students allows me to conclude that the memory of Podlasie's folk healers is still alive and that their activity has not completely disappeared, as recently confirmed by Ulanowski [9]. However, society has been changing rapidly since Poland joined the European Union in 2004 [33]. Villages are becoming depopulated, and traditional social ties are disappearing. The phenomenon of traditional native European village healers, compared to shamans, may disappear without in-depth scientific knowledge.

### References

- [1] von Ammon K, Frei-Erb M, Cardini F, Daig U, Dragan S, Hegyi G, et al. Complementary and alternative medicine provision in Europe – first results approaching reality in an unclear field of practices. *Forschung in Komplementmedizin*. 2012; 19 (Suppl. 2): 37-43.

- [2] Kemppainen LM, Kemppainen TT, Reipainen JA, Salmenniemi ST, Voulanto PH. Use of complementary and alternative medicine in Europe: Health-related and sociodemographic determinants. *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health*. 2018; 46: 448-55.
- [3] Peltzer K, Pengpid S. Prevalence and determinants of traditional, complementary and alternative medicine provider use among adults from 32 countries. *Chinese Journal of Integrative Medicine*. 2018; 24(8): 584-90.
- [4] Rybicka M, Zhao J, Piotrowicz K, Ptasnik S, Mitka K, Kocot-Kepska M, et al. Promoting whole person health: Exploring the role of traditional Chinese medicine in Polish healthcare. *Journal of Integrative Medicine*. 2013; 21: 509-17.
- [5] Schwabl H, Vennos C. From medical tradition to traditional medicine: A Tibetan formula in the European framework. *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*. 2015;67: 108-14.
- [6] Janes CR. Buddhism, science, and market: The globalisation of Tibetan medicine. *Anthropology & Medicine*. 2002; 9(3): 267-89.
- [7] Jędrzejewska AB, Ślusarska BJ, Jurek K, Nowicki GJ. Translation and cross-cultural adaptation of the International Questionnaire to Measure the Use of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (I-CAM-Q) for the Polish and cross-sectional study. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 2023; 20: 124.
- [8] Zacharek N. [Healer in Polish folk culture and the Buryat shaman. Comparative analysis of intermediaries between sacrum and profane in the ethnological perspective – A contribution to research]. In: *Zwyczaj i Akcesoria Apotropajczne w Cywilizacjach Świata*, editors (2018): Kleczkowska K, Kosior WA. Kuchta I. Łataś. AT Wydawnictwo, Kraków: 91-100.
- [9] Ulanowski K. Sacredness in healing and magical rituals of the folk healers (the szeptucha) from Podlasie. *Przegląd Religioznawczy/The Religious Studies Review*. 2023; 2(288): 15-24.
- [10] Szczepankowska U. ["I'll whisper love to you, all you have to do is believe..." The social significance of folk medicine]. *Societas/Communitas*. 2014; 17(1): 237-58. (in Polish)
- [11] Tomalska-Więcek J. [Podlasie residents towards the value of cult images]. *Kultura Słowian*. 2023; 19: 141-53. (in Polish)
- [12] Conrad JL. Russian ritual incantations: Tradition, diversity, and continuity. *The Slavic and Eastern European Journal*. 1989; 33(3): 422-4.
- [13] Phillips SD. Waxing like the moon: Women folk healers in rural Western Ukraine. *Folklorica*. 2004; 9 (1): 13-45.
- [14] Quartey NK, Ma PH, Chung VC, Griffiths SM. Complementary and alternative medicine education for medical profession: systematic review. *Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine*. 2012; 1: 656812.
- [15] Hozyaszk KK. Knowledge of local folk healers, the so-called whisperers, among paramedic students from eastern Poland. *Explore (NY)*. 2023; 19(3): 290-2.
- [16] Kwaśniewska M, Pikala M, Grygorczuk O, Waśkiewicz A, Stepaniak U, Pająk A, et al. Dietary antioxidants, quality of nutrition and cardiovascular characteristics among omnivores, flexitarians and vegetarians in Poland – The results of Multicenter National Representative Survey WOBASZ. *Antioxidants*. 2023; 12: 222.
- [17] Maffei MC. The vegetarian diet in prison: A human right? The case Jakóbski v. Poland. In: *International Courts and the Development of International Law*. Ed (2013): Pitea C, Scvazzi T, Pitea C, Ragni C. Springer: 489-496.
- [18] Cusack CM, Wilson DB. Scotland's sacred waters: Holy wells and healing springs. *Journal of the Sydney Society for Scottish History*. 2016; 6: 67-84.
- [19] Jekatierynczuk-Rudczyk E. Holy waters in the Podlasie region, Poland, as a witness of hydrological and hydrochemical changes. *Ecohydrology Hydrobiology*. 2020; 20(4): 610-21.
- [20] Cukaci C, Freissmuth M, Mann C, Maarti J, Sperl V. Against all odds – the persistent popularity of homeopathy. *Wiener Klinische Wochenschrift*. 2020; 132: 232-42.
- [21] Bochenek T, Godman B, Lipowska K, Mikrut K, Zuziak S, Pedzisz M, et al. Over-the-counter medicines and dietary supplements consumption among academic youth in Poland. *Expert Review of Pharmacoeconomics & Outcomes Research*. 2016; 16(2): 199-205.
- [22] Barwiński M. The contemporary ethnic and religious borderland in the Podlasie region. *Region and Regionalism*. 2005; 7: 1-10.
- [23] Kruijthoff DJ, van der Kooi C, Glas G, Abma TA. Prayer healing: A case study research protocol. *Advances in Mind-Body Medicine*. 2017; 31(3): 17-22.
- [24] Glenn SM, Cunningham CC. Recognition of the familiar words of nursery rhymes by handicapped and non-handicapped infants. *Journal of Child Psychology Psychiatry*. 1982; 23(3): 319-27.
- [25] Spatar A. The dischant – an archaic form of psychotherapy. *Studia Universitatis Babes-Bolyai-Musica*. 2010; 55(1): 215-41.
- [26] Ruotsalainen J, Carlson E, Erkkilä J. Rhythmic exercises as tools for rehabilitation following cerebellar stroke: A case study integrating music therapy and physiotherapy techniques. *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy*. 2022; 31(5): 431-53.
- [27] Alinejad F, Janbozorgi M, Soleimani AA, Haris MA, Mousavi E. The effectiveness of group cognitive therapy with and without the use of tales of Masnavi on the opposing women's mental health. *Studies in Islam and Psychology*. 2014; 8(14): 129-52.
- [28] Bulut G. Sufi music and its therapeutic benefits. *Journal of Critical Psychology, Counselling and Psychotherapy*. 2021; 21(2): 26-32.
- [29] van der Geest S. Hospital care as liturgy: reconsidering magic, science and religion. *Revista della*

Societa Italiana di Antropologia Medica. 2002; 13: 243-58.

[30] Olchowska-Kotala A, Barański J. Polish physicians' attitudes to complementary and alternative medicine. *Complementary Therapies in Medicine*. 2016; 27: 51-7.

[31] Eardley S, Bishop FL, Prescott P, Cardini F, Brinhaus B, Sanos-Rey K, et al. A systematic literature review of complementary and alternative medicine prevalence in EU. *Forschung in Komplementmedizin*. 2012; 19(Suppl. 2): 18-28.

[32] Quave CL, Pieroni A. Ritual healing in Arbereshe Albanian and Italian communities of Lucania, southern Italy. *Journal of Folklore Research*. 2005; 42(1): 57-97.

[33] Czibere I, Kovach I, Szukalski P, Starosta P. Depopulation and public policies in rural Central Europe. The Hungarian and Polish cases. *Revista de Estudios Sobre Despoblacion y Desarrollo Rural*. 2021; 33: 57-82.