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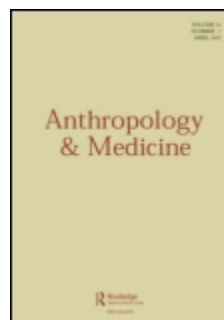
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Health Seeking Behaviour of Mothers of Under-Five-Year-Old Children in the Slum Communities of Nairobi, Kenya

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Abstract

Prompt and appropriate health seeking is critical in the management of childhood illnesses. This paper examines the health seeking behaviour in under-five child morbidity. It explores in detail actions taken by 28 mothers when their children become sick. Sixty-two in-depth interviews with mothers were conducted from four study communities. The mothers were identified from a demographic surveillance system. The interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and

thematically analysed. The study shows that mothers classify childhood illnesses into four main categories: (1) not serious—coughs, colds, diarrhoea; (2) serious but not life-threatening—malaria; (3) sudden and serious—pneumonia; and (4) chronic and therefore not requiring immediate action—malnutrition, tuberculosis, chronic coughs. This classification is reflected in the actions taken and time it takes to act. Shops are used as the first source of healthcare, and when the care moves out of the home, private health facilities are used more compared to public health facilities, while even fewer mothers consult traditional healers. Consequently we conclude that there is a need to train mothers to recognize potentially life-threatening conditions and to seek appropriate treatment promptly. Drug vendors should be involved in intervention programs because they reach many mothers at the critical time of health seeking.

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Mary Amuyunzu-Nyamongo and Isaac K. Nyamongo

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Introduction

Prompt and appropriate health seeking is critical in the management of illness especially among children. Critical behavioural factors in the management of childhood illnesses include early disease identification, early treatment, persistence with treatment, and quickly opting for more effective treatment (Caldwell *et al.* 1989; D'Souza 2003). Although there exists anthropological literature on health seeking behaviour, most of these studies have been conducted in rural areas and focus on specific conditions, for example, malaria (Ryan 1995, 1998; Nyamongo 2002a). Few

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