

7th International Congress On Traditional Asian Medicine

# Traditional infertility treatment

KINGA DEMA

It is not uncommon in Lhasa, Tibet, for Tibetan women struggling to conceive to seek recourse in traditional medicine rather than biomedical hospitals, says social anthropologist, Heidi E Field.

These findings were part of a field research that she carried out last month in Lhasa with the focus on Tibetan medicine. The paper was presented at the seventh international congress on traditional Asian medicine yesterday, at the royal institute of management in Thimphu.

A primary study in 2005 on infertility among women in China, within seven years of marriage, showed that the infertility rate among the minorities, especially Tibetans and Uiguyurs, were higher. The infertility rate among Tibetans in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) was 3.7 percent and among the Tibetans in Qinghai 5.7 percent.

"The high number among Tibetans most likely reflects the

limited access to proper health-care for treating infections and sexually transmitted diseases that might lead to infertility," said Heidi E Field.

Every year, about 10 cases of couples trying to conceive are reported in Lhasa people's hospital that serves people from rural areas, while about 20 cases are reported in the people's hospital that caters to urban areas. However, the hospital for traditional medicine (mentsikhang) reports about 200 cases every year, according to Heidi's research.

Perceptions of women, who are unable to conceive, as in parts of Bhutan, were found to be not only a field of embarrassment and secrecy, but of ambiguity and contradictions.

Heidi E Field said that barren women in the countryside were excluded from rituals, avoided by pregnant women and newborn babies, as people fear that these women could bring evil and bad luck as a result of jealousy. "Barren women are often cremated as it is thought that their bodies



THE TRAD MED CROWD - Delegates at the congress, the largest ever held in Bhutan

will pollute the sky burial site," she said.

Traditional Tibetan treatment of failure to conceive is based on the medical theory presented in the four medical tantras known as the gyushi. Traditional doctors mainly focus on both reproductive substances and organs and their inter-relatedness, according to the research paper.

"While the proper flow of women's blood and the heat of uterus are regulated with Tibetan medicine, the handling of male

reproductive substance is referred to biomedical laboratories," said Heidi, adding that doctors rely both on gyushi and other knowledge sources.

The research states that Tibetan traditional practitioners claim to treat about 70 percent of the females unable to conceive. In case treatment fails, patients are not recommended in vitro fertilisation (IVF) - a reproductive technology in which an egg is joined with a sperm cell in a test tube (in vitro), developed into an

embryo and implanted in the woman's uterus.

In Bhutan though, couples with infertility problems coming for traditional treatment are very rare, according to physicians at the national institute of traditional medicine. "The problem can be treated with routine medical check ups and serkhaps (golden needle) and traditional medicines, but most of them opt for biomedical services," said dungtsho Gembo Dorji.