It is important to study factors that influence families’ health-seeking behavior and their expectations regarding appropriate treatment, as this behavior and these expectations affect the morbidity and mortality associated with acute respiratory infections. In addition, some of these factors influence the mothers’ confidence in their ability to handle the illnesses and their decisions to stop treatment [1–3].

Maternal (includes family) recognition of key signs of acute respiratory infections is essential for distinguishing between relatively minor, self-limiting upper respiratory infections and life-threatening pneumonia. The common perception is that acute respiratory infections are caused by dietary or climatic changes, such as exposure to cold [4–7], and this perception is an important determinant in choice of healers and home remedies.

Factors that influence decisions to seek outside care are fever, cough, and rapid breathing or chest retraction [6, 8]. However, factors that influence the choice of a given provider are maternal perceptions of the cause of illness, cost of care, distance from provider, availability and accessibility of provider, and past experience [9] with a given provider. Families who delay seeking treatment tend to have a “wait-and-see attitude,” due to shortage of money, distance from a health provider, not recognizing the severity of the illness, waiting for home remedies to work, or limited maternal autonomy [5, 6, 10].

Medical pluralism is common in developing countries and is often based on trial and error, perceived effectiveness, uncertainty of illness causation, and the expectation of rapid results [4–6, 8, 9, 11–15]. In developing countries, unqualified doctors tend to overprescribe [5, 16] (as do many qualified doctors), contributing to the increase in antibiotic resistance. In addition, self-medication [5, 17–19], inappropriate courses of medication given by health providers, and discontinuation of therapy by families can all mask some of the symptoms of infection and consequently delay the pursuit of medical care.

References