

## Scope and importance of traditional medicine

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Considerable knowledge accumulated by the villagers and tribals on herbal medicine remains unknown to the scientists and urban people. Many plant species associated with the rural people are on the verge of disappearing and are on vulnerable list. The impact of deforestation, urbanization and modernization is shifting the rural people from their natural habitats and their very knowledge particularly with respect to herbal drugs is slowly disappearing. Our immediate concern is to preserve this knowledge. Whatever knowledge exists today is mostly confined to older generation. In this context some approaches needed for the preservation and development of traditional knowledge are presented here, based on the author's experience in ethno-medico-botanical survey since two decades.

**Keywords:** Traditional medicine, Ethno-medico-botanical survey, Ethnomedicine.

### Traditional medicine

A traditional health care practice of indigenous people pertaining to human health is termed as Ethnomedicine. The knowledge of certain herbs, animals and minerals that have curative and palliative effects were transmitted from one generation to another and it is the outcome of bold experimentation through trial and error method over hundreds of years. Ethnomedicine is the mother of all other systems of medicine such as Ayurveda, Siddha, Unani, Nature cure and even modern medicine. The traditional herbalists are part and parcel of the community and are often familiar with the details of each family and its environs, so that they are in a better position to deal with their day-to-day problems. In fact the native healers take care of the common ailments of the folk in their home setting<sup>1</sup>.

The traditional medicinal knowledge is thought to be within every one's reach and does not require any study or training to practice it. In some families almost all the members are acquainted with some part or other of herbal remedies. The traditional healers specialize in particular areas of their profession. Thus we find some medical practitioners are expert in bone setting, wound healing, poisonous bites, neurological disorders, etc. and some others in spiritual healing, especially the use of incantations while others combine both in their treatment<sup>2</sup>. It is important to note that there is no doubt about the efficacy of herbal medicine among its users. Rural and urban poor people in India rely on herbal remedies since these are within their reach. In fact in remote areas this is the only source of health care available.

### **Status of traditional medicine in the world**

Folklorists, anthropologists and medical scientists alike are studying traditional medicine or ethnomedicine in some countries like Russia, Africa and few European countries<sup>3</sup>. In Russia particularly serious attempts have been made in the post revolution period to scientifically investigate the natural and herbal remedies of native medicine. It is understood that in Russia if a good home remedy is found for any serious ailment it is usually publicized and praised at the highest medical level. This is indeed a highly commendable trend not so evident in other countries. In India treatises prepared by Chopra *et al* as well as Nadkarni and Kirtikar & Basu are well known<sup>4-6</sup>.

China for example is able to provide adequate health care coverage for its vast urban and rural population due to amalgamation of traditional health care system with modern medicine<sup>7</sup>. The inability of the poor countries to develop their own legacy of indigenous medicinal knowledge is because it is denied official recognition. This is partly responsible for the current inadequate health care in underdeveloped countries. Modern health care is not equitably provided due to financial limitations and majority of the people lack access to adequate health care.

### **The claims of traditional medicine**

The claims of African and Indian healers to offer drugs for such conditions as herpes zoster (modern medicine has no cure), psoriasis, hypertension, bronchial

asthma and rheumatism have been clinically examined by number of researchers in pilot trials. Attempts are in progress to prepare a compendium of household remedies from different parts of India, for the treatment of common ailments<sup>8</sup>. The efforts of World Health Organization (WHO) in compiling a global inventory of medicinal plants are note worthy and if adopted by the primary health care (PHC) as strategy, it could provide the people of all nations especially in the developing countries, with comprehensive health care.

### **Traditional medicinal contributions to primary health care**

In this context the contribution made by the traditional medicine to modern system of medicine is worth noting. The well-established drugs given in Table 1 are among dozens that have been developed by the scientists after analysing the chemical constituents of plants traditionally used by tribals and villagers. For instance, researchers isolated reserpine in 1952 from the herb *Rauwolfia serpentina* that has been employed in India for many centuries by the natives to treat snakebites and mental illness.

### **Approaches needed for the development of traditional medicine**

As herbal medicine is the first level of contact for rural people when they require medical care, it is imperative for governments to take immediate steps to introduce the use of traditional medicine to supplement PHC. The government should provide environment to the people

Table 1—Modern drugs developed from traditionally known drugs

Modern drug	Traditional medicinal use	Plant source
Aspirin	Reduces pain and inflammations	<i>Filipendula ulmaria</i>
Codeine	Eases pain, suppresses cough	<i>Papaver somniferum</i>
Ipecac	Controls vomiting	<i>Psychotria ipecacuanha</i>
Pilocarpine	Reduces pressure in the eyes	<i>Pilocarpus jaborandi</i>
Ephedrine	Reduces nasal congestion	<i>Ephedra sinica</i>
Quinine	Combats malaria	<i>Cinchona pubescens</i>
Reserpine	Lowers blood pressure	<i>Rauwolfia serpentina</i>
Scopolamine	Eases motion sickness	<i>Datura stramonium</i>
Theophyllin	Opens bronchial passage	<i>Catharanthus roseus</i>
Diosgenin	Contraceptive	<i>Dioscorea floribunda</i>
Digitoxin	Dropsy, relieves heart congestion	<i>Digitalis purpurea</i>

to take responsibility for their own health. Health education should be given to the people especially concerning the use of indigenous herbal remedies. The PHCs should impart education regarding the identification of various medicinal plants and their usage for the treatment of common diseases. There is need to explore the medicinal properties of plants, which are readily available, and extracts of animal and mineral substances used in traditional medicine, through careful observation and validation for application. The government should provide financial support to promote the potential role of traditional medicine in primary health care. Inventory and documentation of various medicinal plants and herbs, which are used to treat common diseases, should be developed. For the preservation of medicinal plants, establishment of community gardens and kitchen gardens is necessary. This will

ensure sustainable supply of safe, effective and affordable medicinal herbs. Steps taken by various government departments and NGOs in this direction in recent years would definitely strengthen the traditional healthcare systems. This type of initiative will enable the developing countries to look inward rather than continuing to rely on expensive, imported medicines having side effects.

### References

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