

Conditions for Effective Collaboration between Modern and Traditional Medicine

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In spite of the scientific advances made by modern medicine, 75–80 percent of the population turn to traditional medicine for health care. This medicine has evolved with the history of mankind, and traditional knowledge is a popular asset that is integrated into the socio-medical environment.

The OAU expressed a real interest in the subject of traditional medicine during the first symposium on medicinal plants and African pharmacopoeia held in Dakar in 1968. The 1978 Alma Ata Declaration recognizes the role of traditional medicine and traditional healers in achieving the Health for All objective. In 1977, WHO launched the Traditional Medicine Programme and adopted a resolution inviting interested member states to pay appropriate attention to the use of traditional health systems.

Integration

The difference between modern and traditional medicine practitioners lies not only in their way of thinking, but also and especially in their perceptions of man and health. The concepts they use are often different. Due to the

challenges and problems of accessibility to modern health care, there is a tendency to try and integrate traditional medicine into modern health systems. The Health for All objective, to which traditional medicine could contribute, is still a topical question, and health authorities are increasingly challenged about the role traditional medicine could play in improving the health of the people. As the financial affordability of modern drugs is a problem, improved traditional drugs (MTAs) offer an interesting alternative for these mostly destitute populations. Yet, the strategic orientations and programmes of traditional medicine do not always have an important place in

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overall health policies. As a consequence, health workers do not know the principal traditional healers in their districts and are not always informed about government policies on traditional medicine.

Areas of collaboration

There are real opportunities for traditional medicine to contribute to the improvement of health. The promotion of traditional medicine can be achieved through, among other things, the control and sensitisation of traditional healers. Collaboration can be achieved through relevant institutions and the reference universities, and also through government health facilities, where herbalists can sell medicinal plants that can facilitate their contacts with the modern health system. Combined health centres where traditional healers, doctors, and/or head nurses work together allow for a combination of the two medicines. The patients in these facilities benefit from traditional consultations supported by labora-

tory analyses. These clinical experimentation centres may well serve to validate the pharmacological studies (efficacy and safety) on improved traditional drugs which have to be prepared in the appropriate galenic formulation.

Community centres of appropriate technology, which are equipped and have operating means, can be used for manufacturing and packaging these drugs for a regular supply of medicinal plants. Through the training of traditional healers, it will be possible to avoid practices dangerous to people's health and to rationalize their practice. Traditional healers need to be identified and organized in associations in order to have a reliable basis for collaboration.

Joining forces

The WHO regional strategy aims at helping member countries to optimize the use of traditional medicine in order to achieve health for all. It is based on a number of principles, among which are advocacy, the official recognition of traditional medicine by the states, its institutionalisation, and the building of partnerships. Interventions in this area consist in formulating policies, strengthening capacities and promoting research and development. Ministries of Health should collaborate with the other sectors, consumer groups, non-governmental organizations, traditional healers' associations, and training institutions to make the most of traditional medicine.

Taboos have to be lifted and a frank and sincere dialogue framework established for discussions between the professionals of the two sectors which have ignored each other for a long time. Social sciences should better study the socio-cultural background of traditional healers for a better understanding of the concept of traditional medicine, which would help strengthen this collaboration.

The practice of traditional medicine should be regulated in order to improve its efficiency and reinforce its acceptance. The requirements to be met by medicinal plant producers for marketing their products should be clearly stated. The plants that are registered should have the required quality and efficacy, and proof of safety must be established for some plants which, used over time, can cause chronic toxæmia. Their galenic formulations should be improved. The setting up of scientific committees made up of experts to

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review new drug applications is critical. It will also be necessary to produce monographs on the different plants. The studies on medicinal plants conducted in various countries will help to strengthen the scientific and medical bases of traditional medicine.

Priority activities

The role that traditional medicine could play in solving public health problems has not yet been sufficiently explored. The priority activities to be undertaken in this regard can be summarized as follows:

- Knowing the distribution of traditional healers through censuses
- Organizing traditional healers into associations
- Informing and sensitising traditional healers for collaboration with public health authorities
- Informing traditional healers about priority diseases
- Better informing and sensitising regional and district medical officers about the strategic orientations regarding traditional medicine
- Regulating the practice of traditional medicine
- Finalizing the inventories of the growing areas of the principal medicinal plants used by traditional healers
- Creating botanical gardens for self-sufficiency and the preservation of medicinal plants
- Setting up a regulatory mechanism to authorize the marketing of improved traditional drugs
- Ensuring appropriate communication between the different players.

WHO member states at the 50th Session of the Regional Committee held in September 2000 adopted a strategy on the promotion of the role of traditional medicine. The instruments for supporting the countries in the institutionalisation and integration of traditional medicine in modern health systems are being developed.

WHO is also supporting scientific studies on the efficacy, safety, and quality of the plant based drugs used to treat malaria, HIV/AIDS and sickle cell anaemia, among other diseases. Recommendations were made to the countries to create the institutional and structural framework needed for the development of traditional medicine.

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