

TRADITIONAL MEDICINES AND HIV/AIDS

Access to Therapies

Not all Africans have regular access to university-trained healthcare professionals. For this reason, and others, as many as 80% of Africans seek treatment from traditional medicine, according to World Health Organization (WHO) statistics.

Traditional medicine refers to health practices, approaches, knowledge, and beliefs incorporating spiritual therapies, plant, animal, and mineral-based medicines, manual techniques and exercises. These are applied singularly or in combination to treat, diagnose, and prevent illnesses or maintain health. Treatments may have been handed down through the generations, slowly being refined over time.

Clinically-tested antiretroviral drugs restore immune function in patients with HIV/AIDS, but their cost make them beyond the reach of many Africans, even at USD300 a year. Even when therapies are affordable or available at no cost, the isolation of rural communities means that getting to where the drugs can be taken can prevent access to them.

Lack of understanding about HIV/AIDS, and many Africans' long reliance on traditional healers has encouraged many to decide to use traditional medicine as a treatment for HIV/AIDS, even if they have been given clinically-tested HIV/AIDS treatments. Rural isolation, misunderstanding, poverty, and trust in traditional medical institutions all culminate in problems in getting clinically-tested drugs to Africans suffering from HIV/AIDS, and the help of the traditional healers may be the only way to alleviate the suffering.

AFRICAN PERCEPTION OF HIV/AIDS

A significant amount of misinformation is circulating about the use of traditional medicine to fight disease, worsened by HIV/AIDS being misunderstood by African governments. For years, leaders in Africa have denied the causes and effective treatments of HIV/AIDS.

The refusal to recognize HIV as the cause of HIV/AIDS, plus the claim that the disease HIV/AIDS was caused by poverty, hampered South African education about HIV/AIDS and thus HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention. At the International AIDS Conference in 2000, South African President Thabo Mbeki questioned the link between HIV and AIDS and caused an international uproar.

The efforts of WHO and UNAIDS to educate humans about causes and prevention of HIV/AIDS are easily derailed in countries where leaders do not believe them. Such leaders embrace traditional medicines, but often beliefs about the curative effects of such

WHO traditional medicine strategy

The main objectives of the WHO Traditional medicine activities are:

To facilitate integration of traditional medicine into the national health care system by assisting Member States to develop their own national policies on traditional medicine.

To promote the proper use of traditional medicine by developing and providing international standards, technical guidelines and methodologies.

To act as a clearing-house to facilitate information exchange in the field of traditional medicine.

From <http://www.WHO.int>

treatments outweigh any clinical evidence.

South African Health Minister, Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, famously urged citizens to eat beetroot and garlic to fight off HIV/AIDS, scoffing at the clinically proven antiretroviral agents.

Reuters reported in a 12 Feb 2007 article that President Yahya Jammeh of Gambia declared he could cure HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis with his special treatment derived from 7 herbs. No scientific evidence has been reported supporting his claims. With such treatments abundant and trusted in Africa, discerning which treatment is best is difficult.

TRADITIONAL MEDICINE IN AFRICA

One reason traditional cures are embraced so firmly is the integration of traditional healers into every aspect of an African human's life. The healers have spiritual as well as medical roles in their communities, and are involved in traditions such as religious celebrations and moral guidance that make them much more trusted than university-trained healthcare professionals. Gambian President Jammeh insists that any human taking his treatment cease antiretroviral therapies, as do many other traditional healers, in the correct understanding that antiretroviral therapies and traditional therapies interact.

Traditional healers are known for incorporating secret herbal concoctions to aid their patients, a trait related to the mysticism of their position. As a result, herbal treatments vary widely among traditional healers: herbs vary as do their preparation in treatments. While from the standard of modern, clinically-tested standardized biomedicine this is unacceptable, for most of Africa these traditional healers are the only form of healthcare available, and in all cases are usually the most affordable and accessible option. As they are often the only healthcare options

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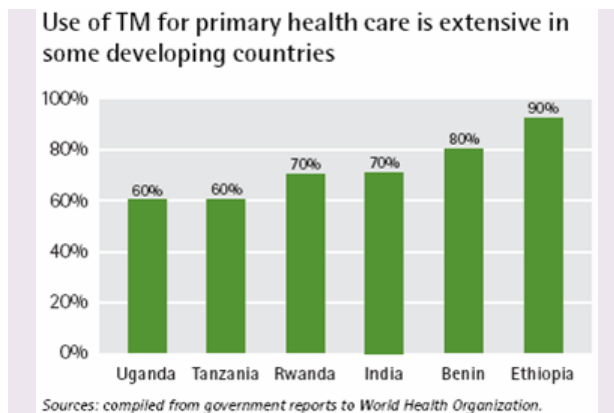


Figure 1 from "WHO Traditional Medicine Strategy 2002-2005", book downloaded from www.who.int.

for the sick and ailing in Africa, they tend to inspire greater trust than more distant physicians. This is not helped by physicians openly criticizing traditional medicine that the Africans had come to believe in over many generations.

TRADITIONAL MEDICINE FOR HIV/AIDS

I found no evidence for the effectiveness of traditional medicine in managing or curing HIV/AIDS; I did not investigate claims for other diseases.

The only effective treatment for HIV/AIDS known to healthcare professionals are antiretroviral agents. These drugs are manufactured by pharmaceutical companies and their equivalents have yet to be found among traditional medicine. The trial-and-error method for disease management, stemming back maybe thousands of years, has not yet happened for HIV/AIDS. As a result, traditional medicines being used to treat HIV/AIDS are unlikely to kill the HIV virus and restore immune function. In some cases, the traditional healers will not admit this limit to the effectiveness of their treatments.

In the lack of written or verbal evidence that could be found during research, the conclusion this writer must make is that the only effective treatment for HIV/AIDS is found in biomedicine, and it is anti-retroviral pharmaceutical therapy.

Against some diseases, according to WHO documents, traditional medicines are highly effective. Additionally, traditional medicines help fight the opportunistic diseases of HIV/AIDS, as many of these diseases have been treated for generations. New properties of traditional herbs are being investigated for effectiveness against HIV/AIDS, and some with potential antiretroviral properties have been found. Two of these are *Hypoxis hemerocallidea* and *Sutherlandia frutescens*. However, no traditional medicines exist that have been clinically effective to treat HIV/AIDS as effectively as HAART

cocktails. However, as yet no traditional medicines have been reported to be clinically able to treat HIV/AIDS as effectively as HAART. Despite the popularity of their use and the support of ministries of health and NGOs in some African countries, no clinical trials of efficacy exist, and low-level evidence of harm identifies the potential for drug interactions with antiretroviral drugs.

COOPERATION WITH MODERN MEDICINE

While clinically-tested drugs may be the only known effective treatments, traditional healers are needed to disseminate knowledge about which therapies work and do not work. In addition, education of traditional healers about steps to prevent HIV/AIDS can help spread knowledge of the disease and combat both the terrible stigma attached to one suffering from HIV/AIDS and better help communities deal with the disease.

In Uganda, THETA (Traditional and Modern Health Practitioners together against AIDS) has supported traditional healers by researching herbal treatments to symptoms of HIV/AIDS, fostering communication, and helping train traditional healers. WHO recommends continuing education of traditional healers in primary healthcare, training students in health science and training university-trained healthcare professionals in traditional healing methods.

FUTURE UNDERSTANDING

As many as 25% of clinically-tested drugs are derived from traditional medicines. With the combination of modern medical technology to isolate and deliver the active ingredients of traditional medicine herbs, new treatments are being developed that either attack HIV or treat HIV/AIDS symptoms less expensively than currently available drugs. Native herbs are being investigated to find new and more effective treatments.

This integration of modern clinical testing and refining and traditional medicines can be profitable to indigenous African pharmaceutical companies. Since traditional medicines are made from locally available materials, treatments derived from them could be quickly implemented in African populations.

Validated information on the use of herbal remedies needs to be supplied to healers and patients, a necessity of communication emphasized by WHO and other organizations supporting integration of traditional medicine.

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