

EDITORIAL

Relationship between Conventional and Traditional Medicine in Cameroon

There seems to be a permanent effort to improve the relationship between conventional medicine and traditional medicine in Cameroon. Indeed, in 1979, a unit of traditional medicine was created within the Department of Health. In 1981, law n° 81/12 of 27 November 1981 was enacted; Section 16-1.3.1.5 is as follows:

During the Fifth Plan, measures will be taken to lay down a joint strategy and method to effectively integrate traditional medicine into the national health plan by implementing a program on traditional medicine in conjunction with some of our neighbouring countries.

In 1981, a Traditional Medicine Unit was set up in the Central Hospital, Yaoundé, followed in 1989 by the creation of a Community Health and Traditional Medicine Service with a Unit in charge of Traditional Medicine. The sector was boosted in 1990 by law n° 90/053 of 19 December 1990 on Freedom of Association, since it led to the creation of several Associations of Traditional Healers all over the country. This was followed later by a note of the Minister of Health requesting collaboration between traditional healers and the public health sector. In 2002, a service for Traditional Medicine was established in the Ministry of Health, including a unit for ethics and deontology and another for legislation and control; there was also a scientific sub-department to promote medicinal plants in the Ministry of Public Health. Further, since 1974, there is an Institute of Medical Research and the Studies of Medicinal Plant (IMPM) in Cameroon, created by decree n° 74/888 of 6 June 1974, and reorganized into a public establishment for scientific research by decree n° 93/215 of 4 August 1993. One of the missions of the institute is to create conditions for the optimization of the impact of our local pharmacopeia and traditional medicine on the health of Cameroonians. One of the operational research centers of IMPM is the Centre for Medicinal Plants and Traditional Medicine Research (CRPMT).

Overall, it is envisaged that Cameroon's traditional medicine should be entirely integrated

into the national health system by the year 2015, by which year all states are expected to finalize their Millennium Development Goal pledges. To this effect, experts from different medical fields and scientific sectors as well as credible traditional practitioners are working hard to develop strategies for transforming local concoctions into modern drugs.

All these efforts are because traditional drugs are relatively cheaper compared with modern medicine, and it is known that some 80 percent of the population seems to use traditional medicine and tradi-practioners one way or the other, often simultaneously with conventional care. There are diseases that the local population believes firmly that only traditional medicine can handle – like madness, and what they believe to be witchcraft related illnesses.

Yet, there are still many criticisms of traditional medicine: most of their drugs profess to cure dozens of diseases; prescriptions traditionally given orally, lack consistency; rarely do any two traditional healers have the same drugs or speak the same medical language; production of the drugs is all a matter of secrecy, transferable only to kith and kins, and not for collaboration with competitors; traditional practitioners have vague knowledge of anatomy and divergent diagnostic methods; and charlatans that peddle fake medicines, putting the lives of the poorest people at risk. On their part, the traditional practitioners believe that conventional medicine practitioners and research scientists seek merely to condemn their art or to steal their secrets.

In spite of all these, there are signs of cooperation in the field. In a bundle of documents submitted to *Health Sciences & Disease* by Tradi-Dr. Choji Isaiah, Secretary of Boyo Association of Traditional Healers for the Fight against HIV/AIDS (BATTAFAA), there is abundant evidence of joint seminars organized in the field by BATTAFAA and the public health services and administrative authorities to discuss issues of community health, especially HIV/AIDS, like the Communal HIV/AIDS Control Committee meetings, Boyo

Administration and Plan International (2003), The Medical Forum Yaounde (2005), International Medical PAN Africa (2005), and many other seminars, during which BATTAF AA shared its knowledge of traditional medicine and traditional healing. The documents attest to the existence of permanent cooperation between tradi-practioners, conventional medicine and the public health sector. They point the way to how the relationship between modern and traditional medicine might be improved. They attest to the fact that many healers have been taught to recognize the symptoms of HIV/AIDS, such as skin lesions, chronic diarrhea, and recurring fever, and are able to help the patient regain appetite, cure the opportunistic diseases, and increase the blood cell count. Importantly, the documents also attest to the fact that public authorities in Cameroon recognise that traditional healers may be instrumental in preventing the spread of the HIV/AIDS virus as well as care for the sick, particularly in rural areas with few conventional medical facilities or practitioners.

This is strengthened by the finding that medicinal plants may actually hold the key to fighting the virus, like studies on the alkaloid michellamine B, isolated from the indigenous Cameroonian plant *Ancistrocladus korupensis*, have shown against the HIV virus.

Health Sciences and Disease congratulates BATTAF AA and its energetic Secretary, Tradi-Dr. Choji Isaiah for their abundant works of collaboration with administrative authorities and the public health services in their area of operation. We encourage other Traditional Healers Associations to work in collaboration with public health and administrative authorities in order to bridge the gap between traditional and conventional medicine in Cameroon.

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