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Overview on Ethiopian traditional medicine: Status and perspectives

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Traditional Medicine is a widely growing health system and of economic importance. Population throughout Africa, Asia and Latin America use traditional medicine to help meet their primary health care (PHC) needs. This paper therefore gives a general overview on the indigenous or traditional medical system of Ethiopia. Ethiopians heavily relied for centuries on a system of traditional or indigenous health care knowledge for various physical and mental disorders. It is widely perceived and embedded in beliefs, and practices primarily through the use of plant-based remedies besides animal products and minerals. About 80% of the population relies on the traditional system of medicine in the provision of health care. The indigenous knowledge and traditions of Ethiopia utilize the herbal resources available in nature. Ethiopia has a significant portion of two of the world's 25 biodiversity rich areas hot spot i.e. the eastern Afromontane: Biodiversity Hotspot and the Horn of Africa-Biodiversity Hot Spot. These hotspots house a lot of the useful wild biodiversity, particularly that of medicinal plants. The indigenous knowledge is transferred from generation to generation orally. It is more diverse based on the ecosystem and the household level health practices. The health practices that start from home remedies for primary health care to specialized healing traditions like bone setting, poison healers, delivery, and veterinary healers are found among various. The Ethiopian traditional medical system is practiced by traditional healers which are categorized as herbalists, bone settlers, traditional birth attendants and spiritual healers. Herbalists are considered to be the biggest group that uses medicinal plants. They use in one way or the other plants and plant products in their medical practices. Ethiopia has policies, legal framework and strategies that support the development and utilization of plant resources in a sustainable manner besides the recognition of traditional medicine. The recognition of the actual and potential significance of traditional medicine in Ethiopia was not limited to issuance of appropriate policy frame works. Organizational measure with respect to the development of traditional medicine on a scientific basis has also been taken; this is expressed by organizing a research institute, namely the Ethiopian Public Health Institute (EPHI) that facilitates a multidisciplinary research in traditional medicine. Information on medicinal plants species and their folklore use in the traditional health care system are documented in an electronic data file without which no appropriate research agenda can be formulated. Multi-disciplinary research work has been and being undertaken with major emphasis on the evaluation of the safety, efficacy, constituents and quality of traditionally claimed medicinal plants on diseases of public health importance. Encouraging results have been obtained on the efficacy and safety of some of the medicinal plants for priority health problems from these studies. Many research papers and publications have been resulted from these undertakings. The regulatory aspect of traditional medicine is mandated to Food, Medicine and Health Care Administration and Control Authority (FMHACA) which set standards of safety, efficacy and quality of traditional medicine and issue license in order to use traditional medicine in the health service. The protection of intellectual property right (IPR) and conservation and sustainable utilization of medicinal plants are dwelt by other Ministries. Conservation and sustainable utilization of medicinal plants is undertaken by the establishment of the Institute of Biodiversity within Ministry of Agriculture that ensures the country and its communities to obtain fair and equitable share from the benefits arising out of the use of genetic resources and community knowledge and community right. All the above efforts showed the recognition and potential significance of traditional medicine to meet the primary health care. This could strengthen and enhance the development of Ethiopian traditional medicine to effectively make use of the beneficial aspects which could facilitate its integration with the existing conventional health care system and achieve the goal health for all.

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