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Research and development in Papua New Guinea traditional medicine

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Papua New Guinea (PNG) is one of the most biologically diverse places on earth. It is estimated that 15,000 to 20,000 individual species of vascular plants may be found in PNG; most of these are endemic. A rich tradition of medicinal plants use exists in PNG with well over 50% of the population relying exclusively on traditional herbal medicine for health care. The government policy aims to incorporate traditional medicine in the primary health care system. Consequently, scientific investigation of commonly used medicinal plants has been undertaken through various national and international research initiatives. Traditional medical knowledge has been largely oral, and one of the early tasks was to undertake a systematic and comprehensive documentation of medicinal plants use, practiced in communities across the nation. This work has led to establishment of traditional medicine database with detailed account of over 4000 traditional preparations from approximately 450 plant species. Phytochemical analysis of medicinal plants, determination of antibacterial activities of herbs used in respiratory and related conditions, standardization and validation of traditional herbal medicines employing both chemical and pharmacological approaches and a broad drug discovery program from PNG natural materials are the major thrust of these researches. PNG experiences HIV epidemic, and in our recent works the question that is being addressed is whether commonly used medicinal plants in PNG interact with HIV to either suppress the infection or to exacerbate it. The findings indicate that plants that inhibit HIV in the laboratory have the potential to contribute to successful management of infection and may be useful to people living with HIV (PLHIV) who have irregular access to anti-retroviral therapy (ART). Conversely, plants that activate latent HIV in the laboratory have the potential to shorten the period of disease latency in asymptomatic PLHIV and therefore pose a potential hazard. This presentation will attempt to highlight researches over the last two decades on PNG traditional medicine and provide direction for its inclusion in PNG national health system.

Biography

Prem P Rai (PhD) teaches at the University of Papua New Guinea, School of Medicine and Health Sciences. He specializes in Pharmacognosy and Traditional Medicine. He also heads the traditional medicine program of the National Department of Health in Papua New Guinea. He has published more than 80 papers in reputed journals and authored number of technical books including one on medicinal plants in Papua New Guinea, published by the World Health Organization. He serves as an Advisor and Member on Editorial Board of number of local and international scientific journals.

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