

Editorial

Herbal Medicines: Challenges

Herbal medicines are but one component of complementary and alternative medicine, which includes acupuncture, chiropractic manipulation, meditation, homeopathy, and other approaches. Since the introduction of orthodox medicines in Africa, the use of herbal medicine in treating various ailments has existed alongside western medicines. Herbal medicines are playing major roles in the health of thousands of people worldwide. In spite of the vastly improved health and longevity in the United States and Europe, millions are turning back to traditional herbal medicines in order to prevent or treat many illnesses, and a reasonable proportion of drugs dispensed in community pharmacies now contain drugs extracted from plants. The high demand for herbal medicines from traditional medical practitioners in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa is a clear indication of the attitude and beliefs of people about the medicines

Herbal medicines have good values in treating many diseases including infectious diseases, hypertension, etc. That they can save lives of many, particularly in the developing countries, is undisputable. The major challenges of any pharmaceutical scientist are serious problems with the overall quality, safety and efficacy of herbal products. Preservation and dosage measurement are serious problems in developing countries. The label claim and other information provided for the use of a herbal preparation may be far from what is in

the 'bottle'. Sharp practices such as the addition of orthodox medicines to herbal preparations by some traditional medical practitioners have been reported. Different orthodox medicines may be added to a herbal preparation with the hope that one of the added drugs may cure the user's ailment. Just because an herb is natural does not mean that it is safe, and claims of remarkable healing powers are often not supported by reliable evidence. Unfortunately, most countries do not have regulatory policies that can effectively protect their citizens from the identified problems. For example, herbal products are regulated as dietary supplements in the United States, and are therefore not subject to most of the requirement that proprietary drugs must meet before they can enter the marketplace.

Reports that some herbal medicines are contaminated, toxic or interfere with the metabolism of drugs used to treat cancer or AIDS has reduced the enthusiasm of United States consumers for herbal medicines. As a result, the sale of herbal products in United States has reduced in the last two years. The public now seeks more authoritative sources of information in that country, and credible compendia and data on web sites are available. However, the advertisement and sales of herbal medicines are on the increase in Nigeria. Reasons for this increase include aggressive advertisement on newspapers, radios and televisions, and unparallel enforcement of regulatory

guidelines. Other factors include cultural practices, religious beliefs, past experiences, traditional beliefs and behaviours, influence of friends and relatives, economic consideration and poorer health. The recognition of supernatural causes of illness is at variance with western medicine but has a great influence in the subscription to herbal medical practice.

Despite their many challenges, herbal medicines afford clinical and research opportunities that should not be neglected when greater regulation of these products is

considered. Without doubt, the therapeutic potential of many herbs is yet to be fully discovered. Recent discovery of artemisinins (new class of antimalarials drugs) in Chinese herbs supports this assertion. Nevertheless, if herbal medicines are to assume a respected place in the contemporary health care, the quality of the data and the quality of the herbal products themselves as well as regulatory control of herbal medicines must improve greatly.

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Editor