

## EDITORIAL

# THE DECADE OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL MEDICINE: PROGRESS SO FAR



The 50<sup>th</sup> Session of the WHO Regional Committee for Africa recognized the importance and potential of traditional medicine for the achievement of health for all. Participants urged accelerating the development of local production of traditional medicines in order to improve access to health care for the African Region. In 2000, the Regional Committee adopted the Regional Strategy on Promoting the Role of Traditional Medicine in Health Systems.

Thus, the year 2010 marks a Decade since the Regional Strategy was adopted. It also marks the end of the Decade on African Traditional Medicine (2001–2010) declared by the Summit of Heads of State and Government in Lusaka in July 2001. The year 2010 also marks eight years since the institution of African Traditional Medicine Day on 31 August of every year as part of a strategy to boost the role of traditional medicine in national health systems. The decision to observe such a Traditional Medicine Day

**The World Health Organization estimates that 80% of the populations of Asia, Africa and Latin America use traditional medicine to meet their primary health care needs. For many people in these countries, particularly those living in rural areas, this is the only available, accessible and affordable source of health care.**

was endorsed by the Summit of Heads of State and Government in Maputo in July 2003. Therefore, the theme chosen to mark the “double anniversary” is: *A Decade of African Traditional Medicine: Progress so Far*.

During the Decade, more than half of the 46 Member States of the Region have formulated national traditional medicine policies and regulatory frameworks to ensure the efficacy, safety and quality of traditional medicines and the regulation of the practice of Traditional Health Practitioners. Member States have established structures, programmes and offices in their Ministries of Health to institutionalize traditional medicine in health care systems. Currently there are 36 countries with such policies

and 39 countries with offices in Ministries of Health to support the development of traditional medicine. In addition, a few training institutions such as the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Ghana, have established a Department of Herbal Medicine under the College of Health Sciences for the training of herbal medicine specialists and to provide continuing education for Traditional Health Practitioners.

The Southern African Development Community has developed a Strategy on traditional medicine, while the Economic Community of West African States has established a traditional medicine programme under the umbrella of the West African Health Organization.

In 2008 WHO and its Member States, celebrated 30 years of the Alma-Ata Declaration and Member States adopted the Ouagadougou and Algiers Declarations which, among other things, underscored the role of traditional medicine in health systems and the need to produce scientific research findings in support of traditional medicine.

In response to all these resolutions and declarations, some countries have promoted research through the establishment of national institutes. These institutes and centres have intensified their efforts to produce scientific evidence on safety, efficacy and quality of traditional medicines, which may have public health importance particularly in the treatment of malaria, opportunistic infections of people living with HIV/AIDS, diabetes, hypertension and sickle-cell disease. Preliminary results from these evidence-based studies are promising.

A number of countries have developed national herbal pharmacopoeias to document medicinal plants that have been found to be effective and to further ensure their safety, efficacy and quality. The West African Health Organization in collaboration with WHO Regional Office for Africa is developing a West African Herbal Pharmacopoeia, which will contain monographs

covering some of the medicinal plants common to all the countries of the sub-Region.

Some other countries produce small-scale traditional medicines from wild crafted or cultivated medicinal plants. These traditional medicines are registered with national medicines regulatory authorities and some of these medicines are included in national essential medicines lists. However, there is need for building capacity of countries in order to ensure sustainability, Good Agricultural, Collection and Conservation

Practices of medicinal plants and Good Manufacturing and quality control practices of traditional medicines.

Protection of traditional medicine knowledge is a very important area and Member States therefore need to develop mechanisms within the framework of the global strategy and plan of action on public health, innovation and intellectual property adopted by the 61<sup>st</sup> World Health Assembly in 2008. Effective implementation of the plan, which charts a roadmap for research and protection of traditional medical knowledge,





among others, will enable Member States to document, preserve, protect and further exploit the social benefits and potential of African traditional medicine.

This special issue of The African Health Monitor aims to present a contemporary picture of traditional medicine in the African Region from distinct perspectives. The first is an overview of traditional medicine situation in the African Region. Then we offer a focus on clinical practices in African traditional medicine and collaboration between practitioners of traditional medicine and

conventional medicine. The next section is on research and development of medicinal plants. A section on local production of traditional medicines is followed by a focus on the protection of traditional medical knowledge.

Despite the achievements of this decade, much still needs to be done if traditional medicine is to occupy its rightful place in national health systems. Member States need to develop and implement policies and regulatory frameworks to allocate and mobilize additional resources for conducting basic research and to undertake more clinical trials in order to

generate scientific evidence on the effectiveness of traditional medicines. Emphasis should be placed on the need to further exploit the rich and diverse African natural resources, which can contribute to discovery and development of new traditional and orthodox medicines. Member States also need to enforce regulations to ensure safety, quality and efficacy of traditional medicinal products, practices and to regulate practitioners. In addition, Member States need to enhance efforts to train health professionals, health science students and traditional health practitioners in traditional medicine and to foster greater collaboration between practitioners of the two systems of medicine as a key strategy for institutionalization of traditional medicine into national health systems.

WHO remains committed to providing support to Member States in the Region and the promotion of the development of African traditional medicine.

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