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Letter to the Editor

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African Traditional Medicine (ATM) Day 2022

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Journée de la Médecine Traditionnelle Africaine (ATM) 2022

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Since the year 2000, 31st of August of every year has been set aside by the World Health Organization (WHO) to celebrate the contributions of African Traditional Medicine (ATM). The 2022 commemoration highlights the challenges against the development of ATM in Nigeria and how they can be overcome; how the country can maximize it to boost foreign exchange earnings and health care; and what role ATM can play in addressing the rise in viral and infectious diseases such as monkeypox, COVID-19, Marburg virus, Langya Henipavirus, Polio and others. This letter addresses the above issues raised by Nigerian Office of the WHO.

According to the WHO, Traditional Medicine refers to the knowledge, skills, and practices based on the theories, beliefs, and experiences indigenous to different cultures, used in the maintenance of health and in the diagnosis, improvement or treatment, and prevention of physical and mental illness (1). Up to 80% of the population depends on ATM either primarily or as an adjunct to orthodox medicine for their health needs. The main issues with ATM practice in Nigeria are enumerated as follows;

What have been the challenges towards the development of traditional medicine?

The followings highlight some of the challenges of ATM; (i) many traditional medicine practitioners use both incantations and herbal medicines for treatment of patients. This practice

ice makes traditional medicine appears mysterious, unscientific and therefore unacceptable to a large proportion of the populations (2); (ii) many herbal drugs are prepared with hot alcoholic drinks that can damage the kidneys and the liver, especially in children (3); (iii) inadequate knowledge of the mode of action, excretion and dosages of the herbal drugs; (iv) unhygienic environments of the herbal medical practices; (v) lack of approval by health regulatory bodies; (vi) inadequate training of the herbal practitioners; and (vii) lack of publications of herbal drugs in high impact peer-reviewed journals.

How can Nigeria overcome these challenges?

The following suggestions are enumerated; (i) demystifying the use of native medicines, with separation of incantations from the use of medicines; (ii) extraction of active components of the leaves, fruits, seeds, barks or roots of the herbal plants; (iii) conducting pharmacodynamics and pharmacokinetic studies on the extracts; and attaining appropriate dosing of these medicines; (iv) conducting toxicological tests of the drugs on laboratory animals. In early August 2022, the National Agency for Food Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC) withdrew approval for five previously approved alcoholic bitters because they cause kidney damage; (v) conducting clinical trials for efficacy and safety of the drugs; (vi) publications of the research outcomes in peer-reviewed scientific journals; (vii) inclusion of ATM in national health policies and national health strategic plans; (viii) encour-

raging healthy collaboration between ATM and orthodox medicine practitioners; (ix) increase funding for researches on medicinal herbs; (x) establishment of regulatory body for ATM and its practitioners, code of ethics for ATM practitioners, setting up national research institutes dedicated to ATM, registration and local production of traditional medicine products; (xi) cultivation and growth of medicinal plants; (xii) institutionalised training and re-training programmes for practitioners of ATM; (xiii) national plan for integrating ATM into the country's Primary Health Care (PHC) system; (xiv) incorporating Traditional Birth Attendance (TBA), as currently being done in Lagos State health care system through collaboration with orthodox medicine, training and re-training of TBA practitioners on when to refer a woman in labour to the near-by hospital. This is yielding positive results and should be emulated by other States of the Federation (4). This form of collaboration should also be extended to other units of medical care, for instance, the Traditional Bone Setter (TBS) practitioners should be seen by the Orthopaedic surgeons as partners in progress and not as antagonists or nonentities.

How can the country maximize ATM to boost foreign exchange earnings and health care?

The Government of Nigeria is making deliberate efforts towards maximizing traditional medicine to boost healthcare and foreign earnings; (i) The Government, through the Ministry of Health, recently held a conference of Traditional, Complementary and Alternative Medicine (TCAM) in June 2022. The Minister of Health, Dr Osagie Ehanire, stated at the conference that plans were in the pipeline to ensure that traditional medicine practice is legally absorbed into the PHC of the country (5). The main objective of the conference was to encourage the growth and utilization of the over 10,000 species of medicinal plants that Nigeria is endowed with as potential sources of raw materials for the Pharmaceutical, Food and Cosmetic industries within and outside the country. This will create direct and indirect job opportunities for Nigerians. This can be used to boost foreign exchange earnings through short, medium, and long-term value chain and by attracting agricultural business loans and Bank of Industries (BOI) manufacturing loans. This will increase Nigerian benefit from the global herbal medicine market largely dominated by China, United States, Germany, India, and Thailand, and is projected to reach seven trillion USD by 2050 (5).

What role can ATM play in addressing the rise in viral and infectious diseases such as Monkeypox, COVID-19, Marburg virus, Langya Henipavirus,

Poliovirus, and others?

The following are some of the promising plants; (i) *Securidaca lonipedunculata* (violet tree), also called *Sanya* (Hausa) or *Ipeta* (Yoruba) is an anecdotal plant that is believed to treat all ailments. It is a well-respected plant among the Hausa tribe that they refer to it as *Umar magunguna* meaning, "mother of medicines, the yellow roots of which is normally chewed in the mouth; (ii) *Enantia chlorantia*, also called *Awo-pa*, *Osopupa*, *Dokita Igbo* in Yoruba is another legendary plant. Others are wild grapes (for asthma), neem tree (for malaria), and guava leaves tea (as an immune booster) (6,7). In a recent study by Abubakar et al., (8), a number of diseases such as hepatitis, poliomyelitis, monkeypox, smallpox, yellow fever, Lassa fever, meningitis, and COVID-19 were reported to have been treated with some selected medicinal plants in some northern Nigerian States (Katsina, Kebbi, Kwara and Sokoto), with moderate success.

Conclusion:

The future of traditional medicine in Nigeria is very bright if all stakeholders play their due roles for the growth and development of the sector.

Contributions of authors:

BA designed the project, searched the literature and reviewed the manuscript. JI also searched online literature and wrote the first draft. All authors agreed on the final manuscript.

Conflicts of interest:

Authors declared no conflict of interest

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