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Promoting traditional medicine in west Africa : Prospects and challenges

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Abstract

The 15 countries of West Africa constitute the Regional Economic grouping known as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) with an estimated population of 300 million. Available records indicate that nearly 80% of the population relies predominantly on Traditional Medicine ™, particularly herbal medicine for their healthcare needs. For example, in countries such as Ghana, Mali and Nigeria, 60% of cases of malaria-induced fever in children are treated with herbal medicines. TM remains popular in this part of the world for historical, cultural and economic reasons. Many governments in the region have therefore recognized the need to promote the sector to improve access to quality healthcare for the people. However, having made the provision of modern health care services a priority, it is a huge challenge for any government to have adequate resources to develop its TM sector. The TM sector is therefore hugely underfunded, resulting in a proliferation of quacks with doubtful abilities and intentions preying on the vulnerabilities of the people. Efforts to promote TM in the ECOWAS region are also hampered by absence of national policies and regulatory frameworks; lack of appropriate mechanisms to control safety, efficacy and quality of TM products; low-technological methods of preparation and poor manufacturing practices; inadequate support for TM research and development; lack of protection of indigenous knowledge and biodiversity; poor/absent conservation methods resulting in high rates of deforestation and lack of training/education programmes for TMPs. In an attempt to support the Member States to institutionalize TM in their health systems, in 2007, the West African Health Organisaion (WAHO), at the behest of the ECOWAS Heads of State, established a TM programme. This decision was époque making as it marked ECOWAS as the first Regional Economic block in Africa to take concrete steps towards the attainment of the Alma-Ata Declaration of 1978 that called on WHO member states to include TM in their primary health care systems and to recognise Traditional Medicine Practitioners as health care providers. This presentation aims to outline the efforts being made to drive the sector vis-à-vis the prospects and challenges.

Biography

A native of Ghana, Dr Kofi Busia is a product of the University of London and Middlesex University in the UK. He is a chartered chemist, medical scientist and medical herbalist with rare expertise in phytochemistry and phytopharmacology, which he combines with herbal practice, teaching and research. Kofi was recruited in January 2007 as the Programme Officer for Traditional Medicine to assist WAHO to establish the traditional medicine programme for its institutionalisation into the health systems of the ECOWAS member states.