

# Herbal medicine: Trend of practice, perspective, and limitations in Pakistan

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## ABSTRACT

Although in this modern era, there are a much more advancements in modern medical treatments, traditional medicine, especially herbal medicines, has always been practiced. More than 70% of the developing world's population still depends on their treatment on herbal treatment. Perceptions and believes of the community often lead to self-care or home remedies and consultation with traditional healers like Hakeems. Therapies like herbal treatment have been utilized by people in Pakistan who have faith in spiritual healers, clergymen, Hakeems, homeopaths, or even many quacks. Different diseases such as infertility, epilepsy, psychosomatic troubles, and depression, and many other ailments are still treated by herbal therapy. Herbal medicine is the crucial part of traditional medicines, so sector has become an important source of healthcare, especially in rural and tribal areas of the country. In Pakistan, the growth rate of medicinal plants is very high. Pakistan has a very rich tradition in the use of medicinal plants for the treatment of various ailments. With the requirements of the modern era, the integration of the modern and herbal treatment in terms of evidence-based information has become necessary. In Pakistan, there is a need to take reforms regarding practice. The herbal way of treatment have reached us passing through different stages, so it is highly important to bring improvements in different fields, i.e. education, sale, storage, import, and export of herbal medicines. There is a need of sharing of knowledge between herbal and allopathic practitioners. The knowledge about the herbal treatment should spread between the health-care professionals as well as the patients.

**Key words:** Herbal medicine, current practice, practice trend, practice limitations, practice perspective

## INTRODUCTION

In developing countries, herbal medicines are being used by 75-80% of population. The use of herbal medicines is about two to three times more than conventional treatment which is published by the World Health Organization (WHO). The use of herbal medicine is still existed as a conventional way of treatment; the WHO has recently defined traditional medicine (including herbal drugs) in clinical practice. The modern medicines are being originated from medicinal plants, minerals, and organic matter. There is a handsome literature include Rigveda, Atharvaveda, Charak Samhita, and Sushruta Samhita explaining medicinal plants. Thus, the herbal medicines have been obtained from rich traditions of past civilizations and scientific evolution.<sup>[1]</sup>

Herbal medicines are preferred because they are considered to be safer, cheap, and easily accessible.<sup>[2]</sup> Majority of the treatment done in the past was the plant origin. Examples include aspirin (willow bark), digoxin (from foxglove), quinine (from cinchona bark), and morphine (from the opium poppy).<sup>[3]</sup> With the emergence of the world, medical history is filled with evidence of persons who used herbs to heal the sick of the society. Herbal medicine was also an effective healing method but was taken less ardently.<sup>[4]</sup> As the industrial revolution came the use of allopathic medicines prevailed, and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the use of conventional medicines have become limited as the new synthetic

drugs were economical.<sup>[5]</sup> The use of herbal medicines decreased in early 19<sup>th</sup> century, as advancement in scientific methods, and it was considered to be quack practice, but later on it appeared as Natural Health in 1960, and the use of herbal products increased that led to the establishment of the office of Alternative Medicine by the National Institute of Health USA, in 1992. Worldwide, herbal medicine received a boost when the WHO encouraged developing countries to use traditional plant medicine to fulfill needs unmet by modern systems.<sup>[6]</sup>

## PERCEPTION OF THE USE OF HERBAL MEDICINES

Herbal medicines comprise of either portion of plant parts or unpurified plant extracts that work together synergistically. The recent studies show that public take interest in herbal remedies due to several factors some of which include (i) Efficacy and effectiveness of herbal remedy, (ii) people prefer as they believe that herbal medicine is superior than synthetic products, (iii) due to cost and side effects of modern medicines, (iv) due to belief that certain diseases are not treated by synthetic drugs and medicines have proven to be ineffective or inadequate, (v) high cost and side effects of most modern drugs, and (vi) as people think that their physicians not treat them properly, so they prefer self-medication through natural medicines.<sup>[7]</sup> Furthermore, due to

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religious belief and people affiliations to spiritual thoughts, they are easily attracted by natural ways of treatments.<sup>[8]</sup> Sometimes people work for relative approach as they select herbal medicine as these works for their friends and family.<sup>[9]</sup>

## WHY PEOPLE PREFER HERBAL MEDICINES?

Evidence found that earliest herbal therapy used by people was Neanderthal period.<sup>[6]</sup> A number of people use herbal medicines along with recommended treatment and do not report to their practitioners.<sup>[10]</sup> There are multiple reasons for patients turning to herbal therapies. As people consider that diseases such as diabetes, cancer, arthritis, and AIDS are not curable, they move to herbal medicines. In conditions such as common cold and cough and bee bite, people adopt natural ways of relief. People of rural areas believe that where a disease born its treatment is also there in plants. Moreover, toxic events occur abundantly with conventional medications that are difficult to treat, but the herbal medication is much safer, and their toxicity is easily manageable.<sup>[6]</sup> In India, different communities have no assessed to modern medicine.<sup>[11]</sup> Hundreds of primary health centers are devoid of adequate supplies of drugs; this population is heavily dependent on traditional medical systems.<sup>[12]</sup> It is believed that natural plant products are safer than manufactured medicine.<sup>[13]</sup>

## HERBAL MEDICINES PRACTICE IN PAKISTAN

### Historical Background

In Pakistan, people use Unani medicines, and there are numerous ways to use plants for a home remedy. People are also interested in homeopathic medications while in northern areas Amchies and Sanyasis are practicing herbal medications as an Ayurvedic way of treatment. The dominant traditional system of medicine in Pakistan is the Unani system. In tribal areas, as there is no developed system of medication people have knowledge about local plants for basic health issues.<sup>[14]</sup>

### Biodiversity of Medicinal Plants

Due to limited healthcare facilities in Pakistan and illiteracy, and poverty people prefer traditional medications to treat ailments. As the country has diverse areas and cultural values, the medicinal plants also vary therefore a huge variety of plants around 600-700 plants are used to treat ailments.<sup>[15]</sup>

### Prospects

The herbal industry is fastly growing in the world, and the sale values are increasing than US\$40 billion a year.<sup>[16]</sup> In Pakistan, from Indus Valley civilization up till now Unani medicines are being preferred as a very rich tradition.<sup>[17]</sup>

### Regulation of Herbal Medicines

According to the global survey, there were only 14 Member States having regulation of herbal medicines before 1988, but the passage of time in 2003, there became 53 Member States (37%) having laws and regulations. Out of those Member States, the 42 (49%) Member States declared that these regulations were in the developmental stage. It shows regulation on herbal medicines in the Member States are increasing. In most of the member states

(97 out of 142 respondents), herbal medicines are sold as over the counter medicines, while in 50 Member States herbal medicines are sold as prescription medicines. Medical claims, health claims, and nutrients contents claims are the most common types of claims. 90 Member States allow medical claims, 62 allow health claims, and 49 allow nutrient content claims, there are 86 Member States (61%) that have a registration system for herbal medicines, and 17 have 1000 or more registered herbal medicines. As many Member States are giving the regulation of herbal medicines.<sup>[18]</sup>

### Regulation in Pakistan

In addition to Ayurvedic and homeopathic, the Unani system has been accepted as a national health system. Pakistan is the only country where formal Unani teaching institutions are recognized. There are 45,000 traditional healers, of whom about three-quarters are practicing in rural areas.<sup>[16]</sup> These practitioners in rural areas are a source of healthcare delivery system in Pakistan. In rural and urban areas of Pakistan, at both public and private sector approximately 52 600 registered Unani medical practitioners are practicing. Provincial authorities have established. About 360 Tibb dispensaries and clinics that provide free medications.<sup>[19]</sup>

### National Council for Tibb (NCT)

After completing education and examination of Tibb-e-Unani and Ayurvedic system of medicine, Tabibs are registered by this council. There are 22 council members out of which 14 are elected through a process of postal ballot, and remaining are appointed by the federal and provincial government. The tenure of members is 5 years. The president is selected from these members. There are approximately 45,799 Hakims/Tabibs, and 537 Vaid registered with NCT and about 28 recognized Tibbia colleges.<sup>[20]</sup> There are two universities that are imparting 5-year BEMS degree along with M. Phil and PhD degrees. Research and development in herbal medicines sector in Pakistan has not been able to develop a coordinated institutional infrastructure and human resource; therefore, it is on the documenting level. The research is being conducted mainly in universities and in various institutes to establish their antimicrobial, antiplatelet, and acetylcholinesterase, inhibitory constituents, inflammatory, analgesic, gut modulatory, antidiarrheal effects, and constipation effects.<sup>[21-25]</sup>

### Trend of Herbal Medicine in Pakistan

In Pakistan, people of tribal localities and in villages are using plants as medicines from long ago because this knowledge is transferring to them through generation-to-generation and is based on experience. As the villages are far away from cities, people are economically weak and increasing prices of synthetic drugs results in acceptance of Unani medicines.<sup>[26]</sup> According to the WHO, approximately 80% of world's population of developing countries still depends on alternative systems of medicine, while about half of the population in industrialized countries uses herbal medicines.<sup>[27]</sup> Pakistan is among the eight leading exporters of medicinal plants.<sup>[28]</sup>

### Limitations

As the allopathic medication system is antagonistic of traditional medication system.<sup>[29]</sup> Therefore, practices are vigorously restricted in their access, labeling them as antiscientific and imposing penalties on their practice. Due to quacks practicing in different areas by different names of medications and lack of accountability the importance of herbal medications is decreasing and lowering respect of them in community. As if we see political

background of allopathic way of treatment, we find that it belongs to British rulers' thus occupying entire health system. Thus the looking down behaviour towards herbal practitioners develop the sense of antagonism.<sup>[30]</sup> It seems that a few practitioners use the herbal way of treatment along with conventional way of treatment and discourage others. In Pakistan, it is under consideration to bring postgraduation degree in Tibb, but still it is unclear.<sup>[31]</sup> There are certain laws on legislation of profit sharing, intellectual property rights, and registration of herbal products.<sup>[32]</sup> There is not proper research on herbal medicines except of evidence from old documents. As there is no proper training system to store herbal plants, thus, the herbal plant population is threatened. Deforestation is also alarming for herbal plants.

## CONCLUSION

In developing countries, the healthcare system has become more complex as instead of developed countries where there is advancement in healthcare system. Technologies due to increase in number of chronic diseases and the safety efficacy of herbal medicine the use of herbal medicines renewed. The use of herbal medicine is not like that of allopathy medicines, but it works like enzyme in major health regarding issues. In Pakistan, people have a great faith on herbal treatment; therefore, it is considered that practitioners and policymakers will retain its position in health. As herbal approach transferring to us through generations, thus, it is highly important to bring improvements regarding education, sale, storage, and import-export of herbal medicines. There is a need of sharing of knowledge between herbal and allopathic practitioners and research institutes.

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