

HIV/AIDS: Research

In our second part of the four part series we ask the question:

Can traditional medicines treat HIV/AIDS patients? Scientists are trying to answer this question in laboratories around the country as more and more claims surface. With a vaccine and most certainly a cure, still proving evasive the world over - the focus of scientific research into traditional medicines is increasing. As Zanele Buthelezi reports the lack of funding seems to be a challenge in making significant progress in this regard.....

TEXT:

For centuries, many people looked to the forests for plants to give them good health. Today little has changed as the World Health Organization shows that about 80 percent of the continent's population consults traditional healers. Researchers are interested to find out what key the plants may hold to solving the HIV/AIDS puzzle.

A number of plants have been recognized for their medicinal benefits, including the African Potato (ilabatheka**), Artemisia afra (**umhlonyane**) and Sutherlandia (**unwele**).**

Acting Dean of the Nelson Mandela Medical School at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Professor Nceba Gqaleni, explains

Ups [There are a number of modern drugs that are derived from medicinal drugs that have been used for ages by traditional healers. The advantage of modern medicine is that you can, through science, identify key bioactive compounds and process them and synthesise them in a factory and sell them in a large scale.]

About a hundred traditional herbal medicines have been presented to the Medical Research Council for scientific research since 2004 on claims that they have medical benefits to HIV/AIDS patients. Six out of seven has passed safety tests.

The Medical Research Council is now expected to do two clinical trials. Dr Gilbert Matsabisa is the Director of the Indigenous Knowledge Systems Unit...

Upsound [We've completed one study on humans, again that was on safety and we did not find anything. There were people coming in saying they have more energy. They were feeling great. There was one issue that concerned us. They were passing more urine. That has given us enough ground to say we want to do clinical trial on HIV positive people, so that we can answer the question of effectiveness.]

There are also observational studies being done where patients being treated by traditional healers are monitored

[There've been three observational studies and in those we've seen the same pattern. There was an improvement in the health and the quality of life of those people. That is why we want to do a proper study.]

Dr Matsabisa says their work is based on researching three kinds of products but would not divulge the name of the plants or mixtures for protection of healers' intellectual rights....

[We deal with plants, immune modulators, used in combination with others. Leaf, mixture of plants and vitamins....]

There's an acceptance among some traditional healers that the cure for HIV/AIDS is yet to be discovered. But they say they do have remedies that can help prolong the lives of people living with the disease. Sutherlandia, for instance, has been used as an immune system booster.

But another study released last year in an HIV journal, Aids, found that Sutherlandia and the African Potato reduce the effectiveness of ARV. Chairperson of the National Committee of Traditional Healers, Sazi Mhlongo says the plants have been misused.....

Ups [Ilabatheka or the African Potato of hypoxis has been taken and people started going to all the hills digging it because it was mentioned that it helps. But we knew that as traditional healers that no - isiphusha somuthi lesi - it's not going to help them because there are things that are done by ilabatheka when you over use it. I think the scientists of late have also discovered that there's trouble with hypoxis.]

Mhlongo says these plants are used in combination with others because of the dangers they pose. He further adds that they are then used to treat mental illnesses and for cleansing.

However, there are efforts to further research plants and remedies claimed to have medicinal benefits to HIV/AIDS patients. Local and US scientists, healers and nurses have teamed up to conduct clinical trials on Sutherlandia at Edendale Hospital in Pietermaritzburg. Dr Gqaleni says this trial will investigate whether Sutherlandia has the same treating capacity as antiretrovirals...

Upsound [The key that we need to research is whether they have fundamental antiretroviral properties. That is the research that is taking place in South Africa. I think if we can establish that and develop that I think we would have made significant progress in terms of developing traditional medicines.]

Patients with a CD-4 count above 350, above the critical level of 200 who are not on antiretrovirals will be recruited to be part of the study.

Funding is another challenge that some healers, who want their medicine to be scientifically validated, say is difficult to obtain for the procedure. Makhosi Chris Mthiyane of Ogunjini is one of those who have failed to get the necessary funding after having drawn up a proposal.

Dr Matsabisa admits that funding is a problem. With a high number of claims the MRC receives, he says it's difficult to invest in all of them...

[We need the basic evidence to use in search for funding. We need to have that evidence first before we can fund anything because it's expensive to run a clinical trial. I'll be spending R4-5 million to do what I'm doing. So we need to make sure that what we invest in is going to have some benefit.]

Meanwhile, some healers remain skeptical about availing their concoctions or herbal mixtures for scientific scrutiny in laboratories. They say there's lack of effective protective mechanisms.

But Dr Matsabisa says healers are well protected when they present their traditional medicines for research. He says they enter into confidentiality agreements...

Upsound [These agreements address the issue of intellectual property. So, the people that we work with are more comfortable and relaxed because they know that their intellectual property, the whole ownership is not being taken away from them.]

Dr Matsabisa acknowledges that healers need to be educated about how the MRC works, whether through the media, to put to rest their fears. Healers are kept up to date with the progress almost on a monthly basis and they are also allowed to come and observe every now and then. He says the research being done is to make the information available....

[We want to put a caution to the public. It is not all the immune modulators or traditional medicines that can give you a health benefit. The best would be for people to look at what has been done. They phone the MRC and ask what it recommends or what has been researched, so that people make that informed decision about the choices they make for their health.]