

HIV, There is Hope Traditional Medicine Meets Modern Medicine

Alawode Oladele, MD, MPH

The issue of AIDS in the 21st century will be one of the greatest challenges to the leadership of a lot of countries, especially those of the developing nations. In some parts of the world, HIV now affects every aspect of our social, economic and political existence.

The approach to the AIDS issue must be more holistic and comprehensive, and it must represent a long-term vision. It has to be a vision driven by indigenous communities but appropriately supported by the rest of the world.

This summer, I had the opportunity to attend the Thirteenth International AIDS Conference. This article represents one of a series of articles about the conference, with the first focus being on traditional medicine. The XIII International AIDS Conference was held in Durban, South Africa, July 9-14, 2000, and so the world converged on the 'sunshine' province of KwaZulu Natal. In the "Kingdom of the Zulu," the world attempted to "break the silence" involving the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Participants, 12,000 strong, came from all corners of the world, and millions more read, watched and listened. It was ironic, but the conference should not have been held anywhere else: "With a total of 4.2 million infected people, South Africa has the largest number of people living with HIV/AIDS in the world, as well as one of the world's fastest-growing epidemics" (unAIDS fact sheet).

For traditional healers, the conference in Durban provided a follow up to the First International Conference on Traditional Medicines and HIV/AIDS which was held in Dakar, Senegal, March 11-12, 1999. The Dakar conference hosted about 500 participants from 30 countries and 5 continents, of which more than 200 were traditional healers. Dr. Erick Gbodossou, director of the Senegalese promotion of traditional medicine non-governmental organization (PROMETRA) has been the driving force behind a bid to educate the world about traditional medicine. The Durban conference created a forum for dialog between modern medicine and traditional medicine in relation to HIV/AIDS.

PROMETRA's role in traditional medicine was very prominent at the Durban conference. Events coordinated or sponsored by PROMETRA included a march of traditional healers, setting up of a traditional village, a plenary presentation, organization of a training workshop and setting up an exhibition booth.

One of the highlights of the conference was the Self-proficiency Training for Traditional Healers (FAPEG). The goal of FAPEG is the training of traditional healers to become proficient in the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS. Other aspects of the training emphasize the art of natural family planning and the management of childhood diarrheal diseases.

PROMETRA, however, has gone one step further by developing a “train the healer-trainer” (FAPROG), model which helps traditional healers enhance their teaching skills and knowledge base on HIV/AIDS prevention. Both of these programs capitalize on the fact that in a lot of developing nations, an overwhelming majority of the population respects and utilizes traditional healers. It would then seem appropriate for us to not only utilize these traditional healers to help disseminate messages, but to also assure that the healers have up-to-date and reliable information.

At the end of the Durban conference, the traditional healers from around the world gathered together with PROMETRA to present a declaration and some recommendations to the secretariat of the AIDS 2000 organizing committee.

Durban International AIDS Conference World Traditional Healers’
Recommendations:

- increase the involvement of traditional healers in the prevention of HIV/AIDS
- use traditional healers as information, education and communication agents
- provide training sessions for traditional healers in AIDS education
- set up local structures to permit traditional healers to function as educators within their local communities
- involve the use of traditional medicine in the treatment of HIV/AIDS opportunistic infections
- establish and strengthen traditional medicine centers
- preserve the bio-diversity and cultivation of medicinal plants
- involve traditional healers and traditional medicine organizations in scientific AIDS research
- elaborate research hypotheses with traditional healers
- conduct specific knowledge, attitudes and practice studies
- fund specific research on the use of traditional medicine therapies, including medicinal plants
- increase representation of traditional medicine organizations in international research committees, workgroups and scientific advisory committees
- encourage the meaningful collaboration between traditional and modern medicine
- support bi-directional educational programs which increase understanding and respect of both sciences
- exchange and refer patients between the two medicines
- promote the legalization of traditional medicine in countries where legislation

currently does
not exist

- officially organize traditional medicine organizations throughout Africa (and other continents)
(author's own words) into an official and functional network of AIDS-combating organizations

Composed on July 12, 2000, in Durban, South Africa by PROMETRA - The association for the promotion of traditional medicine

World Traditional Healers' Declaration

Whereas:

- for the last two decades, there is renewed interest in traditional medicine worldwide
- modern medicine is still insufficiently equipped to fight new diseases like HIV/AIDS
- antiretroviral drugs are unaffordable to most people affected and infected with HIV/AIDS in Africa (and other developing parts of the world [author's own words])
- there is an emergent need to protect traditional medical knowledge

All traditional healers taking part in the XIIth International AIDS Conference in Durban, South Africa hereby recommend:

- that all countries develop a legal framework for traditional medicine
 - that all traditional practitioners be empowered to take an active role as IEC (information, education and communication) agents
 - that this process be integrated in such a way that:
 - § healers collaborate with modern medical structures
 - § local structures be created to facilitate people's access to health care services
 - § healers participate in biomedical research
 - that an international office be created for the protection of traditional medical knowledge
 - that an international council of professional traditional medical organizations be created to coordinate and advise healers on activities
 - identify the sources of traditional medical knowledge and promote them
- (Recommendations and declaration written by the world traditional healers at Durban International AIDS Conference (minor editorial modifications by author))