

University of Alberta High School Model United Nations 2011

World Health Organization – The Question of the Appropriate Use of Traditional Treatments and Conventional Medicines

Scope of the Problem

With the problems many nations face in their health care sectors, which range from shortages of medical practitioners to problems with accessibility and affordability of prescription medications, there has recently been a shift toward accepting traditional and alternative medicine as viable health care options. The World Health Organization has defined traditional medicine as:

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 prevention, diagnosis, improvement or treatment of physical and mental illness.

The question of the role of traditional medicine in health care is a global issue that affects health care professionals, policy makers, health care associations, and the general public. There are a number of concerns about the implementation of alternative treatments: availability, safety and quality, efficiency, sustainability, and policies. The current goal of the WHO is to determine how traditional medicines can be implemented into our current medical system while still maintaining the standards of quality, safety, extensive research, and effectiveness that its modern counterpart, conventional medicine, holds.

With the widespread access to and improving efficacy of conventional medicines, it seems counter-intuitive to many to promote the use of alternative treatments, but they can be effective in treating certain conditions. For example, when treating muscle strains, the alternative treatment of massage therapy is often used to alleviate pain rather than prescription pain relievers. With the cost of these treatments often being less to the nation, both in the actual cost of the treatment and in the reduction of lost productivity, responsible use of alternative medicine can help alleviate the strain many nations' health systems are currently facing.

Challenges

The challenges with integrating traditional and conventional medicines in a nation's health care strategy include:

- 1) National policy and regulatory framework – Alternative medicines can be effectively integrated into a nation's health care system to alleviate some of the pressure on conventional medicine practitioners. This would require an effective framework for the regulation and oversight of alternative medicine practitioners and standards for testing the quality of herbal remedies.

- 2) Safety, efficacy, and quality – Nations need to ensure that alternative medicines offered in an integrated health care system are safe and effective treatments. This would require the nation to have programs to certify alternative medicine practitioners, regulate ingested or injected treatments and fund research into the safety and effectiveness of historical, current and future treatments.
- 3) Access and Recognition – Nations would need to ensure that regulated alternative therapies are accessible to and affordable for all individuals in their populations, particularly those who are impoverished. In addition, information must be provided to the populace about the safety and efficacy of these treatments.
- 4) Rational use – Traditional medicines should only be used if the practitioners are properly trained in the treatments they offer, and how those treatments fit with the nation's health care strategy. In addition, the populace should be educated on the inherent problems with traditional medicines, such as the difficulty of standardizing the quality of herbal medicines.

Solutions

In the WHO Traditional Medicine Strategy 2002-2005, the WHO set three objectives for nations regarding the practice of traditional and alternative medicine. First, they encouraged member states to develop their own regulated traditional medicine institutions and integrate them into their national health care systems. For example, some nations, such as Australia, China, Japan, Republic of Korea and Vietnam, have university degree programs in alternative medicine that has set an educational standard for alternative medicine practitioners.

Secondly, they try to ensure appropriate, safe and effective use of the products. Traditional medicines are often manufactured in one nation and marketed to other nations. Since so many of these traditional medicines are being traded internationally, health authorities are concerned the proper regulations are not in place to ensure minimum standards of quality and safety in both the manufacture and administration of the treatments.

Finally, they are increasing the availability of accurate information about traditional medicines to the general public. With the UN's direct access to expertise on traditional medicines, the WHO is in an excellent position to contribute to the knowledge pool on alternative medicine. In addition to this, the WHO also works to increase the exchange of information between nations.

Points of Contention

- 1) How to categorize traditional medicine? What treatments are considered to be alternative medicine?
- 2) What policies and regulations should be implemented?

- 3) How should nations ensure the safety and efficacy of these treatments?
- 4) What can be implemented to make the industry sustainable?
- 5) How to ensure that alternative treatments traded internationally have sufficient oversight from harvest through preparation and administration?

Resources

<http://www.wpro.who.int/NR/ronlyres/7F5201AF-79FA-4BF8-9BE5-4A55B541706C/0/RS199911CHN.pdf>

<http://www.who.int/medicines/publications/traditionalpolicy/en/>

<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs134/en/>

<http://www.instituteoftraditionalmedicine.com/index2.html>

http://www.naho.ca/english/pdf/research_tradition.pdf

http://www.scielosp.org/scielo.php?pid=S0042-96862008000800011&script=sci_arttext

http://www.who.int/topics/traditional_medicine/en/

- recommended reading: "Traditional Medicines Strategy"