



Integrating traditional medicines into Western medical treatment

Traditional medicines have been used for thousands of years by Indigenous people in Canada, with demonstrated efficacy in treating a wide range of health issues. Many of the medicines in contemporary biomedical treatments are derived from plants and herbs used by Indigenous people throughout the world. There has been little research done, however, on the integration of traditional knowledge-based treatments with Western biomedical treatments.

In recent years, researchers have begun to examine the chemistry of plants used by contemporary healers and Elders to treat various illnesses. Their projects have confirmed that traditional medicines exhibit chemical properties that can effectively and safely treat illness. Researchers have also tested the safety of traditional medicines when used in combination with biomedical-based treatments.

The World Health Organization¹ (WHO) defines traditional medicine as “the sum total of knowledge, skills and practices based on the theories, beliefs and experiences indigenous to different cultures that are used to maintain health, as well as

to prevent, diagnose, improve or treat physical and mental illnesses.” Traditional medicines are not simply a “thing of the past,” or the mechanism of dealing with illness before the introduction of Western medicine. Traditional medicines are still first-line healthcare for 75 percent of the world’s population. As people around the world adapt to changes in lifestyle, the environment, and climate, certain illnesses rise and fall in incidence while new diseases arise. Elders and healers adjust to these changes by finding new medicines and adapting existing ones.

An example of such an adaptation is the treatment of type 2 diabetes by Cree Elders in northern Quebec (James Bay area). The Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) has funded the Team in Aboriginal Anti diabetic Medicines² (TAAM), which aims to alleviate the effects of type 2 diabetes through a rigorous scientific evaluation of traditional medicines used by Elders and healers. The purpose of the project is not to create new Western medicines, but to combine traditional knowledge and Western medical practices for the treatment and prevention of diabetes.

The TAAM research group, headed by Dr. Pierre Haddad, uses an innovative multidisciplinary approach combining the ethnobotanical knowledge of Cree Elders and healers with phytochemistry, cell-based bioassays, animal models, toxicology tests, nutritional strategies, and clinical research. The research is ongoing, but so far the team has demonstrated that several plants used by the Cree to prevent and treat type 2 diabetes are high in phenolic antioxidants, help regulate blood glucose levels, and influence fat metabolism. Central to the success of this large research program is the involvement of the community throughout the research process. The collaborative delivery of traditional and Western



medicine cannot be integrated without building a two way relationship of trust and respect. The TAAM group built their research plan by working with community representatives including Elders, the Grand Council of the Cree, and the Cree Board of Health to explore the possibility of a collaborative project. Through open discussions with partners and Elders, the team was able to understand the needs and beliefs of community members and then modify their project to best suit the community. From this, the team identified and incorporated six key aspects of ethical Aboriginal health research, which can be used to guide similar projects in the future:

- Respect for culture and knowledge.
- Transparency about the project.
- Sharing ideas and knowledge, with Elders in a central role.
- Inclusion of community members and academics on project steering committees.
- Protection of traditional knowledge and related intellectual property.
- Reciprocal knowledge translation.

Aboriginal Elders and healers in Canada hold a wealth of traditional medical knowledge that has the potential to greatly improve the health of Aboriginal Peoples. It is important that research continues to examine the safety and efficacy of these traditional medicines both when used alone and in combination with Western treatments. This field of research must continue to be community-based, with Elders and other community representatives directly consulted and involved at every level.

Traditional medicines have existed since time immemorial and 80 percent of the world still relies on them. Now, researchers are partnering with communities and Elders to learn about and integrate this knowledge into a Western context. This is a reminder that many of the medicines used today are derived from traditional medicine.

REFERENCES:

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3. www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique/initiatives/tcps2-eptc2/chapter9-chapitre9/

