Integrating traditional and complementary medicine into health systems: social, economic and health considerations

Key messages

• More than 88% of WHO Member States report the use of traditional and complementary medicine (T&CM) by their populations. Much of this usage is historic, but there is also increasing demand for T&CM services.

• A holistic approach to health and wellbeing is the main principle behind many systems of T&CM which offers much in health promotion and disease prevention.

• Individual countries have their own unique sociocultural, economic and political environments that enable or impede the integration of T&CM within health care systems.

• Each country must find its own way of integrating evidence-based T&CM into its health care system to achieve universal health coverage, while finding an appropriate way of coordination between conventional health care and T&CM.

• Appropriate mechanisms and policy guidance for regulating, controlling and monitoring the practices, practitioners and products of T&CM is the key to ensure the safety and quality of T&CM services.

Traditional and complementary medicine (T&CM) is an important and often underestimated health care resource. It has strong potential for preventing and managing lifestyle-related chronic diseases – a key challenge facing the conventional health care system.

Several World Health Organization (WHO) resolutions and the Astana Declaration adopted in 2018 at the Global Conference on Primary Health Care refer to T&CM. They state that the success of primary health care will be driven by extending access to a range of health care services, including traditional medicines.
Background and challenges

Over the past decade, the T&CM field has changed considerably – against a backdrop of evolving global challenges. The contribution of T&CM to primary health care, universal health coverage and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals continue to gain political recognition. In addition, WHO’s COVID-19 research database has over 2500 citations of traditional medicine, and publications on traditional medicine are among the top five most downloaded files on the WHO website. Other factors driving the development of T&CM include:

• Social factors, such as recognizing and respecting the cultural diversity and sensitivity of T&CM practices and beliefs, including local communities with their holistic traditional knowledge and fundamental role in conserving biological diversity. Other important social factors are safety and regulation, accessibility and collaboration with conventional medicine practitioners – an important driver for integration.

• Economic factors, including the potential cost savings associated with using T&CM and the expansion of insurance coverage to ensure access to these medicines. Other important economic factors are the training and education of practitioners, continuing education opportunities and investment in research and development to support integration.

Recognizing the positive health, social and economic impacts associated with T&CM, many governments have developed national policies and strategies to mainstream this form of medicine into their health care systems. For example, the number of Member States with a national programme for T&CM increased from 58 in 2012 to 79 in 2018. The importance of traditional medicine in self-care that promotes health and prevents disease is also well recognized.

However, the lack of appropriate coordination channels between conventional and traditional systems of medicine continues to be a major challenge. Another problem is the lack of mechanisms and policy guidance for regulating, controlling and monitoring the safety, quality and efficacy of traditional medicine practices, practitioners and products.

Key actions and policy recommendations

**Member States should:**

• Commit to exploring ways of integrating safe and effective traditional medicine and services within national health systems – particularly at the level of primary health care – according to national context and priorities. This is in accordance with the United Nations General Assembly resolution (UNGA) 74/2 (2019) on universal health coverage.

• Leverage traditional medicines to strengthen and ensure the sustainability of health care systems. This means filling the gap in access to health care and building culturally sensitive health care systems in the face of various global challenges.

• Integrate evidence-based traditional medicine into national health systems to achieve wide-ranging benefits. These include improving the quality of health care services through the regulation of T&CM products, practitioners and services; meeting population needs and managing noncommunicable diseases; increasing equitable access to care through health insurance; improving accountability through monitoring; and using data to inform policy decisions on T&CM towards maximizing its potential for improving health and well-being.

• Continue to build knowledge and an evidence base on traditional medicine; an appropriate regulatory system for traditional medicine products, practices and practitioners; and an integrative health care delivery system, appropriate to country context and circumstances. This is in accordance with the 2018 Astana Declaration and UNGA resolution 74/2 (2019) on universal health coverage.

**The Secretariat should:**

• Continue to learn from and build on the progress achieved in developing T&CM. In doing so it should aim to provide comprehensive technical support to Member States; harness the full potential of T&CM for better health and well-being; and integrate T&CM into health systems and services while ensuring its safety, quality and efficacy to achieve universal health coverage and the Sustainable Development Goals.
Full integration of evidence-based T&CM into health systems depends on both ongoing governance and political leadership. It requires the active involvement and engagement of all stakeholders at all levels. However, in addition to making political decisions, health providers in an integrated system must learn to work together to provide a shared goal of people-centred (rather than system-centred) care. This process is time consuming and requires a willingness to find common ground and understand where compromises can be made.

Fundamental to implementing an integrated health system is acknowledging and bringing together different ways of knowing and/or different forms of evidence.

The decision to integrate T&CM in a health system must be informed by several factors relating to a specific country, including:

- the types, number and diversity of T&CM and conventional medicine practitioners, products and services;
- population need and demand, informed by country-specific cultural traditions;
- scientific evidence for clinical effectiveness and safety in the use of T&CM products and services; and
- the regulatory status of T&CM.

“The two systems of traditional and western medicine need not clash. Within the context of primary health care, they can blend together in a beneficial harmony, using the best features of each system, and compensating for certain weaknesses in each. This is not something that will happen all by itself. Deliberate policy decisions have to be made. But it can be done successfully.”

WHO Director-General Dr Margaret Chan, addressing the WHO Congress on Traditional Medicine, Beijing, November 2008.

References and resources

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