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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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30.08.2023

The contribution of ancient knowledge: They value alternative medicine and its ancestral roots

Its opponents, often linked to the great interests of the health sector, argue the lack of scientific arguments of some of the alternative therapies. While its defenders claim the contributions of ancestral knowledge and question the predominant tendency in the West to consider health as a business and not as an essential public service



The third week of August the global health system met in a small city in India seeking to enhance the millenary contributions of traditional medicine.

Ministers, scientists, practitioners and alternative medicine promoters arrived in Gandhinagar, Gujarat, to participate in the first World Traditional Health Summit sponsored by the World Health Organization (WHO). For this organization, the main objective of this event on August 17 and 18 was to achieve consensus so that traditional medicine can be regulated and integrated into health systems "safely and based on scientific evidence and evidence."



Poster of the First WHO World Summit on Traditional Medicine.

Ancestral knowledge

Traditional medicine is the first therapeutic option used by large groups of the world's population. The WHO estimates that it is practiced in nine out of ten countries. Some of the means used: medicinal herbs, acupuncture, yoga, as well as very diverse indigenous therapies. Practices that for centuries have been pillars of health in communities on all continents and continue to be essential for millions of people, many of whom do not have access to conventional medicine, generally more expensive and, therefore, more restrictive. Moreover, this ancient wisdom has laid the foundation for the great classical texts of medical science.



In Vietnam, traditional medicine has been an essential part of the national health system for years. Many of the medicines come from forests. Photo Leona Liu ONU.

Many of the natural components used by traditional medicine have made possible the modern pharmaceutical, beauty, wellness and health industries. According to the WHO, more than 40% of pharmaceutical products today are made from natural inputs. Reference drugs, such as aspirin and artemisinin, have millennia-old roots.

However, the contribution of traditional medicine to national health systems has not yet been fully integrated. In many States, the recognition and appreciation of millions of workers, facilities, expenses and products associated with traditional medicine is an unfinished business.

For the WHO, traditional medicine "is the sum of all knowledge, skills and practices based on theories, beliefs and experiences specific to different cultures, whether explainable or not, that are used in the preservation of health, as well as in the prevention, diagnosis or treatment of physical or mental illnesses."



Indigenous peoples claim the right to their own health with ancestral roots. PAHO Photo
For its part, "complementary medicine", or "alternative medicine", encompasses a broad set of health practices that is not part of conventional medicine and that is not fully integrated into a national health system. In many scientific spheres, a unique concept is already used, that of Traditional and Complementary Medicine.

World Reference Centre

In March 2022, and with the purpose of energizing and institutionalizing the contribution of traditional medical and curative knowledge, WHO took a step as concrete as it is transcendent: to create in the city of Jamnagar, in the same State of Gujarat, the [World Center for Traditional Medicine](#), providing the Government of India with an initial investment of 250 million dollars.

Through this initiative, WHO seeks to take advantage of the potential of traditional medicine to improve comprehensive health care globally, using modern science and technology. This centre should coordinate the cooperation, information, biodiversity and innovation needed to maximise traditional medicine's contribution to global health, universal health coverage and sustainable development. Respect for indigenous rights, as well as local resources, is an essential part of the framework for the work of this centre.

A Summit that values

WHO is working to gather evidence and data to inform policies, rules and regulations for the safe, cost-effective and equitable use of traditional medicine, as noted by WHO Director Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus in his keynote address at the India Summit. Who also recognized that "traditional medicine has contributed enormously to human health and has enormous potential." He cited, for example, the use of an active compound in sweet wormwood or artemisinin to treat malaria.



Homeopathy is one of the alternative medicines already recognized by many States. WHO photo.

According to Ghebreyesus, one of the strongest foundations of traditional medicine is to have understood "the intimate links between the health of human beings and our environment." Traditional, complementary and integrative medicine is especially important for preventing and treating noncommunicable diseases and protecting mental health, as well as ensuring healthy aging.

During the Summit sessions, Ghebreyesus issued three challenges to the international community. First, that all countries commit to identifying how best to integrate traditional and complementary medicine into their national health systems. Also, that they present concrete recommendations, based on solid arguments and evidence, that can serve as a basis for developing the next global strategy for traditional medicine. And, thirdly, that they consider this event as a starting point "[to promote a global movement that unleashes the potential of traditional medicine through science and innovation](#)".



Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus director of the World Health Organization. WHO photo.

Latin America and the Caribbean were present at the India Summit. Among other delegations, the Virtual Health Library (Traditional Complementary and Integrative Medicines) and the [TCIM Americas Network](#), closely linked to the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO).

Strategic vision and open debate

This sector of health activity is not a new field for WHO. Already in 2014, Member States adopted the first global strategy on traditional medicine for a period of ten years. [The World Health Assembly held in Geneva, Switzerland, in May 2023](#) extended this strategy for two more years and decided that a new one should be developed for the decade 2025-2034 .



[WHO Strategy on Traditional Medicine 2014-2023, PDF Format](#)

The current strategy defines products, practices and professions of traditional medicine. Products include plants, herbal preparations and others containing plant active ingredients. In some countries, herbal medicines have traditionally contained other natural active ingredients, organic or inorganic, such as of animal or mineral origin. Practices encompass pharmacological therapies with herbal medicines, naturopathy and acupuncture, as well as manual therapies such as chiropractic and osteopathy. Also techniques such as Qi Gong, Tai Chi, yoga, medical Spa and other physical, mental and spiritual treatments.



The practice of yoga integrates the very diverse alternative therapeutic activities. Photo Anupam Mahapatra UN

With regard to the experts who can practice traditional medicine, they are both traditional and complementary medicine professionals, as well as conventional health professionals (doctors, dentists, nurses, midwives, pharmacists and physiotherapists) who provide alternative services to their patients.

For WHO, the key challenge is to promote universal health coverage through the integration of Traditional Complementary Medicine services into the provision of health services, prevention and self-care. There is no longer any doubt: Traditional and Complementary Medicine is safe and effective and its inclusion in universal health coverage plans could extend them far beyond their current limitations and significantly reduce their costs. Both arguments should encourage States to integrate this option into their own health schemes. At present, only 124 States have laws or regulations in this regard.



Some States actively promote traditional medicine. Photo Government of Puebla Mexico.

While complementary and alternative medicine emerged stronger from the India Summit, it will remain at the heart of an unsettled debate. Its opponents, often linked to the great interests of the health sector, argue the lack of scientific arguments of some of the alternative therapies. Meanwhile, its defenders claim the contributions of ancestral knowledge and question the predominant tendency in the West to consider health as a business and not as an essential public service.

Sergio Ferrari from Bern, Switzerland for La Pluma, August 28, 2023

Edited by [María Piedad Ossaba](#)

La Pluma. Net 28.08.2023