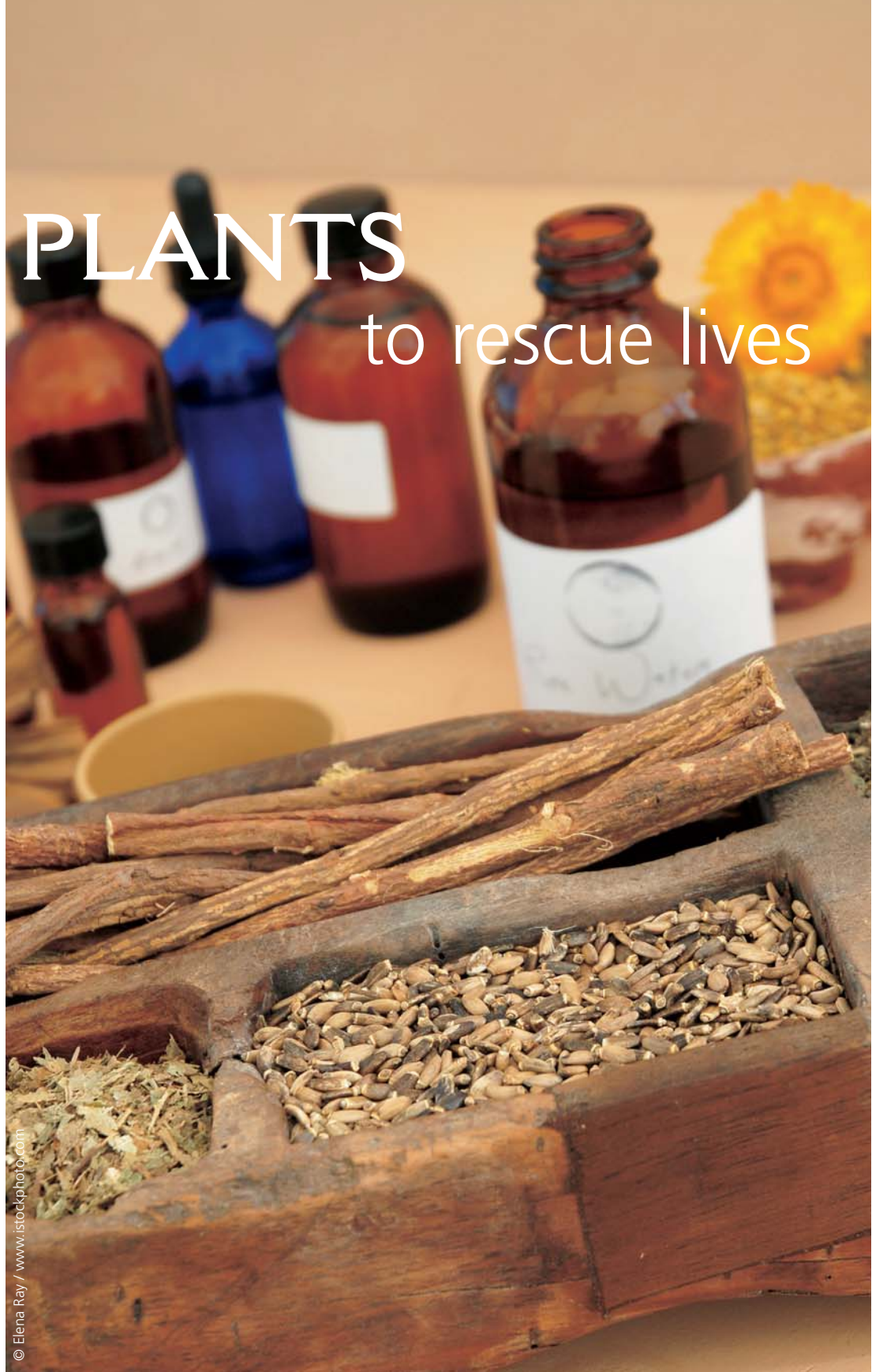


SAVING PLANTS

to rescue lives

For centuries, traditional medicine has been the only health care system available to most people, and today traditional healers still reach more people than their modern trained counterparts. Gradually a growing number of traditional medical systems are being formally recognised. The challenge however remains for the traditional and modern health sector to establish partnerships so that more people can benefit from the best medical care possible.





According to various surveys, the coverage of traditional health care is much broader than that of the modern health care system.

In Uganda for example, there is only one modern trained doctor for every 20,000 people, whereas traditional health practitioners each reach about 200 to 400 people. Indeed policy interest (World Health Organisation, 2002) has underscored the importance of traditional medicine in meeting the health needs of rural communities in the South, as well as answering to the pluralistic health requirements of more wealthy consumers internationally.

Sustaining human health and well-being

Traditional medicine, according to the World Health Organisation, refers to *'health practices, approaches, knowledge and beliefs that incorporate plant, animal and mineral based medicines, spiritual therapies, manual techniques and exercises, applied singularly or in combination to treat, diagnose and prevent illnesses or maintain well-being.'*

Today traditional healers still reach more people than their modern trained counterparts

The role of biodiversity in sustaining human health and well-being is perceived in non-Western societies in terms that are often spiritual and that certainly reflect deep cultural worldviews. Traditional health systems are based within worldviews that take into account mental, social, spiritual, physical and ecological dimensions of health and well-being. They place central importance on the concept of

balance within the individual, and between the individual, society and nature. Imbalance arises with the breaking of this interconnectedness of life (between individual, society and nature) and results in discomfort and disease. Native Canadian societies for instance, are reviving traditional healing knowledge as a means of revitalising the culture and spiritual well-being of their people.

Threats to medicinal plants

In developing countries, a large proportion of the rural population depends on biodiversity for their livelihood, nutrition and health. Changing forest land into agricultural fields may, in the short term, slightly enhance the nutritional status of the population. As a negative side-effect however, the change in land-use also leads to the loss of important medicinal plants, and exposes the population to diseases resulting from ecosystem imbalance. Over-harvesting for commercial purposes, destructive harvesting practices, habitat

loss resulting from forest degradation and agricultural encroachment have all been recognised as contributing factors to the disappearance of plants. The surge in global demand for herbal medicines has led to an increase of international awareness about the dwindling supply of the world's medicinal plants. Conserving biodiversity by valuing and harnessing it as a 'medicinal storage room' is consistent with poverty

reduction and local public health prevention efforts.

Cooperation for better medical care

As was mentioned, the coverage of traditional health care worldwide is much broader than that of the modern health

Tried and tested traditional methods and products

- 25% of modern medicines are made from plants first used traditionally.
- Acupuncture has been proven effective in relieving postoperative pain, nausea during pregnancy, nausea and vomiting resulting from chemotherapy, and dental pain. Acupuncture has extremely few side-effects. It can also alleviate anxiety, panic disorders and insomnia.
- Yoga can reduce asthma attacks while Tai Chi techniques can help the elderly reduce their fear of falls.
- Traditional medicines can impact infectious diseases. For example, the Chinese herbal remedy *Artemisia annua*, used in China for almost 2000 years, has been effective against resistant malaria.
- In South Africa, the Medical Research Council is conducting studies on the efficacy of the plant *Sutherlandia microphylla* in treating HIV/AIDS patients. Traditionally used as a tonic, this plant may increase energy, appetite and body mass in people with HIV.

For more information, please visit: www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheet



Healer during a healing session in Iquitos, Peru.

care system. In such settings, partnerships between modern and traditional trained doctors may be the only way to effectively achieve health care coverage. Thus traditional medicines may play a key role in combating new and re-emerging diseases. Global priority is currently placed on combating malaria and HIV/Aids.

As the Aids crisis leads an increasing number of countries to question their priorities in health expenditures, there is an emerging awareness that traditional health practitioners can play an important role in delivering an Aids prevention message. There is growing recognition that some traditional health practitioners may be able to offer treatment for opportunistic infections. At the same time, there are concerns about unsafe practices and a growth in claims of traditional cures for Aids. Partnerships between the modern and traditional health sectors are a

cornerstone for building a comprehensive strategy to manage widespread infectious diseases such as Aids and malaria.

Urgency of biodiversity

A precondition for traditional medicine is the availability of medicinal plants. The rapid decrease in plant varieties is posing a threat to the well-being of many communities. Hence, coordination and integration across sectors is needed to harness the potential of biodiversity solutions to local health concerns. Forest management and plant conservation must be integrated in programmes of other sectors: in health to foster better use of plant materials; in education to build awareness of the need for protection and judicious development; and in agriculture to strengthen farmer extension methods for plant cultivation. While small-scale projects are crucial for new directions and progress at the community level, the

Interacting worldviews in traditional health systems

Spiritual

Spiritual dimensions of health and well-being are present in most traditional health care systems.

Material

Biodiversity and conservation of medicinal plants is essential for effective health care.

Social

Traditional health systems place central importance on the concept of balance within the individual, and between the individual, society and nature. Cooperation between traditional and modern health sector is needed for the best medical care possible.

importance of developing international networks that pay attention to biodiversity cannot be underestimated. New funding mechanisms and commitments will be needed to support these initiatives, and will be vital if the promise of 'saving the plants that save lives' - so poignantly outlined almost 20 years ago in the Chiang Mai Declaration of 1988 - is to become a reality.



Based on: Gerard Bodeker, *Medicinal plant biodiversity and local healthcare: Rural development and the potential to combat priority diseases*, in: *Endogenous Development and Bio-cultural Diversity. COMPAS series on Worldviews and Sciences No. 6* (Leusden, 2007). For more information: www.giftsofhealth.org

Dr Gerard Bodeker is Senior Clinical Lecturer in Public Health, University of Oxford Medical School and Adjunct Professor of Epidemiology, Mailman School of Public Health Columbia University.