

Collection and Preservation of Traditional Medical Knowledge: Roles for Medical Libraries in Nigeria

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Abstract

Traditional medical practices have safeguarded the health of indigenous communities for generations. There is a consensus on the gradual extinction of indigenous knowledge including Traditional medical knowledge (TMK). The consequences are that vital knowledge that might contribute to the future survival of man and animals are gradually being lost. It is therefore imperative to preserve this knowledge and save them for the future generations. The paper highlights the role of medical libraries in the preservation of TMK. The paper recommends that as a duty to the people's collective indigenous knowledge heritage, medical libraries in Nigeria as a matter of priority, should develop inclusive policies that support collection development of TMK information resources. If this is done, medical libraries will help not just to preserve this knowledge but increase safe use of traditional medicine products.

Keywords: Traditional Medical knowledge; Traditional medicine; indigenous knowledge; Medical Library; Preservation

1.1 Introduction

A study of the cultural heritage of any group of people reveals unique traditions and customs that in totality make them distinct from other groups. Such indigenous practices are in the areas of agriculture, medicine, environmental practices, language, believe system, and art. It is the sum total of these cultural practices that make up the indigenous knowledge of a community and are passed down from generation to generation.

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UNEP (nd.) defined Indigenous Knowledge (IK) as the knowledge that a local community accumulates over generations of living in a particular environment. Warren (1996) defined indigenous knowledge as local knowledge that is unique to a given culture or society. It is the basis for local level decision making in health care, natural resource management, agriculture, education and a host of other activities in rural communities. Such knowledge is passed down from generation to generation through the repository of such knowledge by 'the elder' through word of mouth. Traditional medical knowledge is a people's indigenous knowledge unique to their own system on health and healthy practices including knowledge of indigenous plants and their healing properties. It is the bases for traditional medical practices very much still prevalent in African societies. Traditional medical practice is the use of indigenous plants for healing purposes and best practices that sustain the health of the community. WHO (nd) defined Traditional Medicine (TM) 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." TM not only contributes to the health of the community, but also embodies the knowledge of indigenous plants with their healing properties.

1.2 Traditional Medical Practices in Nigeria

Traditional medicine in Nigeria covers a wide spectrum of indigenous medical practices, which includes the use of medicinal plants, traditional birth attendants and bone setting. It is estimated that 85% of Nigerians access traditional medicine for healthcare, social and psychological benefits. Extracts from plants and animals from diverse parts of Nigeria have been found to be useful for treating diseases such as malaria, diabetics, epilepsy, dementia, sickle cell disorders and inflammation (Adeleja 2006). The importance of TM to Nigerians is seen in its wide availability and use in all communities that make up the nation.

Its acceptability is attested by the fact that almost all news media including newspapers and magazine regularly feature articles on health effects of different indigenous plants and fruits. Officially traditional medical practice is recognized by the Nigerian government. WHO (2001) chronicled the regulatory situation of traditional Medicine in Nigeria as Formal legislation promoting traditional medicine dates to 1966 when the Ministry of Health authorized the University of Ibadan to conduct research into the medicinal properties of local herbs.

A 1992 decree created the National Primary Health Care Development Agency with a broad mandate concerning health matters, including the endorsement of traditional birth attendants. The National Traditional Medicine Development Programme was established in 1997. Since then, the Federal Ministry of Health has been instituting measures to formally recognize and enhance the practice of traditional medicine. In September 2006, in line with official support for TM in Nigeria, the Federal Ministry of Science and Technology, funded and commissioned a book titled Abstracts of Published Research Findings on Nigeria Medicinal plants and Traditional Medicine Practice which collects 1,050 research efforts by Nigerian scientists published in 1,020 international journals since 1972.

2.1 Why Preserve Traditional Medical Knowledge?

In recent times there is a general consensus on the gradual extinction of IK systems in African communities including traditional medical knowledge. This is partly the result of the advent of colonization which presented Africa cultural practices as inferior and was seriously discouraged by the colonial masters. The consequence is the adoption of western cultural practices to the detriment of indigenous culture. Government favored Western Medicine with its highly developed evidence base care approach to treatment.

TM was neglected leading to the stunting of development of the indigenous system. Nwokocha (2008) noted that one of the most notable features of medicine in the latter part of the preceding century were vigorous criticisms against traditional systems of healthcare delivery, almost to the point of suffocation. The consequences are that vital knowledge that might contribute to the future survival of man and animals are gradually being lost. Preservation of traditional medical knowledge therefore includes measures to safeguard traditional medical knowledge from going into extinction and saving them for future generation. The WHO TM conference held in Beijing in Nov 2008, highlighted the necessity for the preservation of traditional medical knowledge by stating in the first article of the conference declaration that

- The knowledge of traditional medicines, treatments and practices should be respected, preserved, promoted and communicated widely and appropriately based on the circumstances in each country. This can be done through planned documentation of the existing knowledge.

Equally, the gradual extinction of indigenous knowledge systems in African communities including traditional medical knowledge (TMK) may stem from the fact that individuals usually elders in the communities are the repository of traditional medical knowledge. This knowledge is passed down by words of mouth to the trainee who might be a family member. However, if this knowledge is not passed down, the knowledge is lost with the death of the individual. Some solutions have been proffered to arrest this negative trend. One of such is the resolution by World Health Organization Executive Board held in January 2009 that emphasized the need for national policies to support integration of TM into health system (Economic and Social Council, 2009). The prevalent theme of the meeting was ensuring that traditional medical knowledge is not lost (preservation) and that its originators are given credit and appropriate reward for their inventions (protection).

Preservation of TMK therefore involves developing systems that will ensure the continued existence and viability of TMK as well as passing them on to future generation.

2.2 Methods of Preservation

Documentation is the main method of preserving knowledge. Traditional Medical knowledge can be documented in books, periodicals such as newspapers journals, indexes and material medica, other media for preservation including multimedia recordings and Information and Communication Technologies can be harnessed for collection and preservation of TMK. Indian traditional knowledge digital library system is an example of digitization effort to preserve traditional medical knowledge. This digital database includes the names of hundreds of traditional Indian medicines and their specificities, available in both local and Western languages in which data are translated.

3. Barriers to the Collection and Preservation of TMK

The major barrier to the collection and preservation of TMK is in its mode of transmission. Traditional knowledge is transmitted orally from generation to generation. A good part of this knowledge is not captured or recorded in print or electronic media. The main area of concern on IKS in Africa therefore, is how to collect and preserve it for posterity (Ma Rhea, 2004). Another importantly barrier is that the practice of TM is generally characterized by secrecy. There is a general unwillingness of practitioners to document and disclose the source, content, method and application of their drugs. In most cases, apart from family members who may imbibe the knowledge, traditional practitioners die with their knowledge (Sithole, 2007).

These barriers pose serious challenges in capturing, recording and documenting the knowledge for preservation. However, the paper hopes to create the necessary awareness on role of medical libraries in the preservation of TMK for the sustenance of the genre for posterity.

4.1 The Role of Medical Libraries in Preserving Traditional Medical Knowledge

One core duty of medical libraries is preservation and dissemination of information and knowledge in the health domain. Currently, the trend in medical libraries in Nigeria is to focus mainly on western medical information. Yet medical libraries with their information management skills can play key roles in preservation of TMK. Medical libraries have potentials roles as preservers of indigenous medical knowledge in print and electronically. These roles lie in their mandate of being agencies for collection, preservation, and dissemination of health information and knowledge. A number of writers have highlighted the role of libraries in the preservation of indigenous knowledge Kargbo (2006) noted that different strategies and combined efforts are needed to revive indigenous knowledge. Librarians are among important agents for this purpose since their main duties involve information storage and access. Librarians should therefore build collections of all formats of indigenous knowledge materials, documentations and recordings. According to Anwar (2010), the Information Management profession that specializes in organizing human knowledge and an information channel for users are well positioned to participate highly in Indigenous knowledge preservation from identification to use. The profession will have to develop new tools and techniques in order to meet the requirements of IK management. Ngulube (2002) enjoin information professionals to ensure that they are involved in preservation of IK despite the fact that it is mainly transmitted orally.

IK should be managed and preserved just like other western information materials that are recorded in written format. He summarizes what information professional can do as

- Preparing inventories and registers of traditional knowledge systems.
- Making Ik accessible to the community by means of marketing strategies
- Developing standardized tools for indexing and cataloguing IK systems.
- Compiling bibliographies of IK resources.

Libraries involvement in collection and preservation of TMK will achieve two purposes; it will preserve the genre for prosperity and at the same time ensure that people have access to safe and quality information on traditional medicine. As noted by WHO (nd) injurious adverse reaction can result from traditional medicine use if the product or therapy is not produces in acceptable standards or ingested incorrectly. Making the appropriate and correct information on usage to be available to patient will be helpful in reducing these side effects and dangers. In her statement on Indigenous Traditional Knowledge IFLA (2003) recognizes that the character of indigenous traditional knowledge does not lend itself to print, electronic or audiovisual means of recording but, in order to ensure its continuing preservation, access and elaboration recommends that libraries and archives should

1. Implement programs to collect, preserve and disseminate indigenous and local traditional knowledge resources.
2. Make available and promote information resources, which support research and learning about indigenous and local traditional knowledge, its importance and use in modern society.
3. Publicize the value, contribution, and importance of indigenous and local traditional knowledge to both non-indigenous and indigenous peoples.

The adoption and implementation of these advocacies by the various authors will help libraries contribute to the preservation and sustenance of this vital heritage for the benefit of the people. Medical librarians in their role as custodians of health information should be part of the move to preserve indigenous knowledge. Currently, the trend in medical libraries in Nigeria is to focus mainly on western medical information. According to Sithole (2007), libraries need to map out what they can do in documenting indigenous knowledge. They need to see African indigenous knowledge as being vital to improvement of the life of the society. This will help them to define the roles libraries can play in the collection and preservation of African indigenous knowledge for the populace.

- find out the problems encountered by the libraries in the collection and preservation of traditional medical knowledge

4.2 How Medical Libraries Can Participate

Librarians can apply their knowledge of Information management to the collection of traditional medical knowledge in both book and non book formats. For systematic participation of medical libraries in Nigeria to the preservation of traditional medical knowledge, the following recommendation is being made:

4.2.1 Develop Inclusive Acquisition Policies

There are related and sub- disciplines that make up the field of Traditional Medical Knowledge. This includes Phytotherapy, Ethnomedicine, Ethnobotany, Pharmacognosy, Herbal medicine. Heads of Medical libraries should develop library policies that incorporate these sub-disciplines of traditional medicine into the mainstream collection development.

Developing acquisition policies that recognizes TMK will be the foundation for a planned and systematic involvement of medical libraries in the collection and preservation of TMK. This policy will provide guidelines on the nature of materials to be acquired, copyright and patent issues, target users, disseminating methods, and preservation methods i.e. as a special collection.

4.2.2. Develop Africana Special Collection Sections TMK

This special collections should include information resources in all formats on TMK including books, journals newspaper cuttings, and digital resources

4.2.3 Create Awareness and Publicize Collection

Project initiation and implementation begins with awareness. Head of libraries should not only collect quality TMK resources, they should create awareness of their existence and publicize the resources.

4.2.4 Build skills in Collections and Preservations of TMK

Library schools should develop courses on indigenous knowledge management that will include building expertise in collection and preservation of traditional medical knowledge. Medical librarians through the auspices of Medical Library Association of Nigeria can join in documenting the existing knowledge by liaising with the National Traditional Medical Council to gather information from experts in the field. This information can be used to develop databases of TMK both in print and digital format. Indian traditional knowledge digital library system is an example of such collaborative effort.

This digital database includes the names of hundreds of traditional Indian medicines and their specificities, available in both local and Western languages in which data are translated.

5. Conclusion

Medical libraries have important part in preservation of traditional medical knowledge in Nigeria. There is need for a research to find out the contributions of medical libraries in Nigeria to the preservation of the knowledge that is unique to their own system. As a duty to the people's collective indigenous knowledge heritage, medical libraries in Nigeria as a matter of priority, should develop policies that support collection development of TMK information resources. If this is done, medical libraries will help not just to preserve this knowledge but increase safe use of traditional medicine products.

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