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USE OF FOLK REMEDIES AMONG PATIENTS IN KARACHI PAKISTAN

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Background: The concept that food is medicine is being practiced in certain parts of the world, with positive outcomes on health of the population. We have such practice in Pakistan but it needs to be brought in line with the available scientific evidence. **Methods:** The study was conducted on 270 patients, visiting the Family Practice Center, the Aga Khan University, Karachi. A questionnaire was used to collect information on the demographic profile, and the use of folk remedies for medicinal uses. **Results:** Substantial use of folk remedies for different medical conditions has been documented. The remedies included cinnamon, ginger, cloves, cordimon, sesame oil, poppy seeds, honey, lemon, table salt, eggs and curd. The medical conditions in which folk remedies are used in respondents' view, include conditions such as common cold, cough and flu to more serious conditions such as asthma, jaundice and heat stroke. **Conclusions:** We have found a substantial use of folk remedies for treatment of medical conditions. There is a need to organize their use on scientific lines.

Key-words: Traditional medicine; Folk remedies; Primitive medicine

INTRODUCTION

Natural products have been in use as medicines for the past several thousand years, as a result of human knowledge. Today, several modern pharmaceuticals are manufactured from compounds derived from natural products. Aspirin is now considered a magic drug of modern times, but even as far back as two and a half thousand years, it was obtained from the white willow bark and used for its medicinal properties¹.

A lot of kitchen items are used for their medicinal properties. Honey has been used as a medicine throughout the ages, and in more recent times has been 'rediscovered' by the medical profession for its medicinal properties². It is interesting to note that several historical drugs have crossed the line from drug to food, including coffee, tea, lemon and pepper¹.

In today's age of evidence-based medicine, the continuing use of folk remedies for the treatment of medical conditions warrants evaluation. As an initial step, we established the need to explore patients' perceptions concerning the use of folk remedies for the treatment of medical conditions.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

We conducted a questionnaire based, cross sectional survey. A questionnaire was developed to collect information, on the perceptions concerning the use of folk remedies in the treatment of medical conditions, among patients presenting to the Family Practice Center, at the Aga Khan University Hospital, Karachi.

The questionnaire was piloted before the final study was started. The study investigators got together before initiating the study, so that individual bias could be minimized.

The Aga Khan University hospital is a tertiary level teaching facility, in the private sector. Approximately ten Family Physicians run the Family practice Center. On an average, twenty four patients

consult each Family Physician daily. Information on the demographic profile of the respondents was also collected to see the background of the study population.

Patients were selected by convenience sampling. They were explained the details of the study and were asked to sign a consent form after confidentiality was assured.

RESULTS

We were able to administer the questionnaire to 270 respondents. The mean age was 36.39 years with 207 (77%) women and 63 (23%) men. The majority was married, well educated and better placed socio-economically than the rest of the population in the country (Table-1).

Table-1: Demographic Profile of the Study Population (n=270)

Parameter	Number (%)
SEX:	
Males	63 (23)
Females	207 (77)
Mean Age (In years)	36.39
Marital Status:	
Single	52 (19.3)
Married	217 (80.3)
Others (Divorced/widowed)	1 (0.4)
Educational Status:	
Illiterate	13 (4.9)
Primary	9 (3.3)
Secondary	8 (2.9)
Matriculation	42 (15.6)
Intermediate	56 (20.8)
Graduate	89 (32.9)
Post-graduate	53 (19.6)
Occupational status:	
Private service	51 (18.9)
Government service	21 (7.8)
Self employed	14 (5.2)
Student	35 (12.9)
Laborer	2 (0.8)
Others including housewives	147 (54.4)

Ten medicinal uses of eleven folk remedies were enquired from the respondents and have been listed in rank order (Table-2).

Table-2: Folk remedies and their uses* (n=270)

Kitchen-item	Medicinal uses (in rank order)									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Cinnamon (Dai Chinni)	Common Cold	Cough	Sore throat	In-digestion	Vomiting	Dianhea	Chest congestion	Tooth-ache	Abdominal pain	Head-ache
Ginger (Adrak)	Cough	In-digestion	Common cold	Abdominal pain	Sore throat	Obesity	To reduce cholesterol	Joint problem	Constipation	Asthma
Clove (Loung)	Toothache	Cough	Common cold	Earache	Sore throat	Vomiting	Dianhea	Swelling of the eye	Fever	Flatulence
Cordimon (Alaechi)	Mouth freshener	Indigestion	Vomiting	Cough	Dianhea	Sore throat	Stomach ache	Common cold	Cough	Abdominal pain
Sesame oil	Dandruff	Hair loss	Earache	Improve quality of hair	Massaging agent	Headache	Common cold	Dry skin	Fever	Sprain
Poppy seeds (Khaskhas)	Insomnia	Dianhea	Sharpens mind	Common cold	Cough	Energy food	Good for health	Heat stroke	Addiction	Headache
Honey	Cough	Common cold	Improve general health	Sore throat	Eye disease	Constipation	Obesity	Jaundice	Acidity	Chest congestion
Lemon	Vomiting	Indigestion	Improves skin condition	Dandruff	Common cold	Acidity	Cough	Heat stroke	Abdominal pain	Low Blood pressure
Table Salt	Cough (for gargle)	Low Blood pressure	Vomiting	Dianhea	Indigestion	Sore throat	Insect bites	Burns	Hiccups	Constipation
Eggs	Hair loss	Dandruff	Low Blood pressure	Good for general health	Common cold	Improve body weight	Cough	Good for skin	Dianhea	Improve muscle mass
Curd/yogurt	Dianhea	Dandruff	Hair loss	Indigestion	Acidity	Stomach ache	Heat stroke	Improve general health	Constipation	Dysentery

* Respondent's view

DISCUSSION

According to the demographic profile of the respondents, the majority belonged to a better socio-economic class and had an educated background. Because of this reason, there can be an argument against the generalization of our finding to the rest of the population, where people are less educated and socio-economically not so well placed. The counter argument is that people from all classes and educational backgrounds visit the Family Physicians, at the Aga Khan University Hospital, thereby offering a more homogenous and representative group. Nonetheless, a community-based study on similar lines will be very useful.

The results show that the patients use folk remedies overwhelmingly, for a variety of medical conditions.

The medicinal uses of several folk remedies have been scientifically proven³⁻¹⁰, while there are others that still wait such recognition¹¹. Their use for medicinal purposes is not always without harm¹²⁻¹⁵.

Physicians have been cautioned, concerning the possibility of adverse effects and drug inter-actions associated with herbal remedies. They are advised to ask all patients about the use of these products¹⁶.

Cinnamon is a common kitchen item with important medicinal properties including a role in the

eradication of *H. Pylori*³. If patients are using it for indigestion then it may have a scientific basis for its use.

Ginger has been shown to have powerful medicinal properties⁵, and its use in cold and flu may well be justified. Its use in the pain relief from osteoarthritis of the knee joints⁷, may offer tremendous benefit to patients in the community.

Cinnamon and Cloves use have been shown to have effect on insulin function but none of the respondents have quoted its use in Diabetes Mellitus¹⁰. There is need to further study the use of these kitchen items in the prevention and treatment of Diabetes Mellitus.

Cordimon is commonly used as a mouth freshener, which is a cost effective way to manage bad breath symptomatically.

The use of Sesame oil has tremendous potential in the relief of nasal dryness⁸. It is a cost effective measure with minimal potential for any serious side effects. Its use in the management of dandruff by the respondents needs further scientific evaluation.

Anti-oxidant properties of some of the natural products may have a role in the prevention of cancers among other diseases⁴.

The use of some of the natural products may have deleterious effects on health. The use of table

salt, for conditions such as low blood pressure may have long term adverse consequences^{13,14,17}.

The use of poppy seeds for various medical conditions, including cancer prevention, may be a serious cause for concern^{9,12}.

Okinawan food culture is one of the world's most interesting because its consumers have the longest life expectancies and low disability rates. The concept that 'food is medicine' is intrinsic of Okinawan culture¹⁸. Certainly there is a need to replicate this model in the Pakistani society.

CONCLUSION

We have found substantial use of folk remedies for various medical conditions. There is a need to seek further scientific evidence for their use. We recommend further trials and education sessions for the doctors and patients on this issue.

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