TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

The purpose of this Briefing Paper is to provide an overview of the Papua New Guinea traditional medicine initiatives undertaken between 2001 and 2010, and plans and priorities for moving forward.

1. Background

Traditional medicine (TRM) was included in the PNG National Health Plan 2001-2010 as one of the new programs for implementation. In line with the global strategy on traditional medicine of the World Health Organization, the Government of PNG officially approved a National Policy on Traditional Medicine in March 2007. The Policy outlines broad principles and provides guidelines for developing traditional medicine and incorporating it into the primary health care system. The Policy recognizes that traditional medicine is already making an important contribution to health care and states that “Traditional medicine shall complement the official health delivery system and will be specifically targeted to meet the health needs of rural communities”.

2. Global Situation

In developing countries, as much as 80% of the indigenous populations depend on traditional systems of medicine, particularly on use of medicinal plants as their primary source of health care. While acknowledging that significant progress has been made during the past 10 years, the WHO Regional Strategy for Traditional Medicine in the Western Pacific 2011-2020 has set out further directions and actions relevant to the needs and health outcomes in Member States. The key objectives proposed for traditional medicine in the Western Pacific for the next decade are: to include traditional medicine in the national health system, to promote safe and effective use of traditional medicine, to increase access to safe and effective traditional medicine, to promote protection and sustainable use of traditional medicine resources, and to strengthen cooperation in generating and sharing traditional medicine knowledge and skills.

3. Papua New Guinea's Perspective, Plans and Priorities

Papua New Guinea is committed to promote safe practice of traditional medicine. Most of the strategies outlined for traditional medicine in the previous National Health Plan have been implemented, though in varying degrees. Notable progress has been achieved in the following areas: establishment of a National Task Force on Traditional Medicine; biological and chemical research into medicinal plants in order to strengthen evidence base of traditional medicine; systematic survey and documentation of traditional medicine practices, and establishment of an electronic database on traditional medicine of PNG; enforcement of National Policy on TRM; establishment of TRM Practitioners’ Guilds at Provincial and District levels; development of training manuals, and training of TRM practitioners in primary health care; intersectoral collaboration in implementing the National Policy on Traditional Medicine; and facilitating participation of NGOs in promotion and awareness of traditional medicine in the community.

In addition to strengthening various ongoing activities, introduction of an “Herbal Medicine Act”, a legislative bill on regulatory requirements for manufacture and marketing of herbal products in PNG and initiating measures to develop local herbal medicine industry would be the next focal activity. Development of an appropriate model for integration of traditional medicine in the National Health System is another priority issue.

4. Conclusion

A health system incorporating traditional medicine has potential to improve health status of communities, and efforts will continue towards achieving this goal.

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