

Use, Prevalence and People's Attitude towards Traditional Medicine in Outpatient Department Setting of a Tertiary Care Hospital in Northeast India

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Present study is aimed at reporting the use and people's attitude towards the traditional system of medicine for their medical emergencies or common ailments. **Methods:** Study was done in outpatient departments of Guwahati Medical College, Assam. Study design was hospital based cross-sectional study, carried out for a period of 4 months. Patients attending outpatient departments were included in the study. A survey using open-ended questionnaire was used to collect the data. Questionnaire survey data was entered in Excel spreadsheets and summarized and reported in Figures and Tables. **Results:** Out of the 259 total participants, 172 (66.41%) respondents consulted allopathic practitioners more than 3 times for diseases they suffered last year. Minority population (18.9%) had consulted traditional medicine practitioners during the last year. Moreover, 62% never consulted a traditional system practitioner during the previous year. Study proved that easy improvement of physical health (25.86%), speedier actions of allopathic medicine (11.58%), lack of improvement of their health problems by using alternative medicinal system (7.72%) and availability of free medicines in the tertiary hospital they visit (1.93%) as the reasons for increased use of allopathic system. A very small percentage (8.88%) of people opinioned that traditional system is best, because of the lack of side effects and suitability of traditional medicinal system in treatment of common ailments. **Conclusion:** It is clear from the study that traditional system of medicine didn't acquire its popularity among commoners in Assam even though many of the developed countries partially or fully support such medicinal systems.

Key words: Complementary and alternative medicine, Prevalence, Traditional medicine use, World Health Organization, Outpatient department, Assam.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional Medicine (TM) occupies an important place in the health care systems of developing countries. The WHO estimates that more than 80% of health care needs in these countries are met through traditional health care practices. Interest in Traditional Medicine is growing rapidly all over world.¹ This interest is driven by a combination of factors including recognition of potential benefits of TM; dissatisfaction with the traditional Western medical model; an increasing commitment to holistic care and increasing evidence for the interaction of psychological factors and outcomes of disease and treatment and health consumer demand and finally the cheap and easy accessibility.²

Customary frameworks of medication incorporate a patient-based indicative framework, an order of infection cycles and elements and a summary of medicines or mediations which address these problems through techniques for natural control (attire, atmosphere and disinfection), diet, actual work, mental preparing and the more energetic intercessions of therapeutic and medical procedure.

Traditional system of medicines is basically situated in a concept of total well-being of patient without considerable side effects. Out of which the predominant ones include 'Ayurveda'³ which means 'Science of Life', Yoga science as well an art of living healthy,

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physically, mentally, morally and spiritually, naturopathy a system of healing science that stimulates the body's inherent power to regain health with the help of five great elements of nature – Earth, Water, Air, Fire and Ether, Unani system of medicine is one of the oldest in the world but still popular and practiced in the Indian sub-continent and other parts of the world with specialization in Iatro-chemistry and Homoeopathy,³ a rapidly growing system and is being practiced almost all over the world. TCM also includes a wide range of therapies, the best-known including acupuncture.³

In spite of being a compelling arrangement of medication, because of elements of restricted training on practice, social predisposition and political and financial factors, most experts have restricted their training to subsets of the traditional medicine in a different way or modern medicinal system. So traditional systems of health care, dealing with both the preventive and curative aspects of such knowledge is generally limited to the members of a group who have undergone specialized training and/or initiations and who are provided a special status or role as acknowledged healers or physicians by the established culture.

By integrating TM and CM into the official health care system there would be an increase in manpower that could provide a higher degree of health coverage (World Health Organization, 1978). The most effective way of extending benefits without great cost is to use and develop local resources (Ieh, 1998). To integrate these two medical systems, there would be need forth TMPs to undergo basic training in orthodox health care practices. Traditional Medicine encompasses a body of knowledge linked to natural resources, specifically biodiversity. Successful integration of TM into the mainstream health care delivery system requires an understanding of patients about the same TM. Local people's attitudes towards TM and its practitioners need to be studied to assess the status of TM and its viability. Furthermore, detailed studies of TM are especially important to inform health policy makers of the role of TM in order to promote it (World Health Organization, 1978).

Therefore, it is appropriate to study the people's understanding and their attitude and knowledge towards the alternative or traditional systems of medicine. Here we explore the practice of and the role of traditional medicine in patient attending a hospital facility in Guwahati city, Assam.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study was done in outpatient departments of Guwahati

Medical College, Assam. Study design was hospital based cross-sectional study. The study was carried out for a period of 4 months. Patients attending outpatient departments irrespective of the specialities of their visit were included in the study. Patients giving incomplete information are excluded from the study. There are many outpatient departments in Guwahati Medical College. Daily attendance in these out-patient departments is found to be a minimum of 115. Patients coming to medicine outpatient department in Guwahati Medical College was only included in the study. Study was carried out 3 days weekly. Those patients who meet the study criteria were enrolled into the study. Consent was obtained from the authorities of Guwahati Medical College and individuals before the study. A survey employing semi-structured interviews and a guided open- and close-ended questionnaire was used to collect the data. An easily understandable and comprehensive questionnaire was made which cover patient demographics, questions about patients' choice of preference, morbidity profile for which he/she consulted the doctor in Guwahati Medical College, patients' last year attendance to both traditional and allopathic practitioners and understanding about advantages of traditional system of medicine. The informants were selected purposively and no appointment was made prior to the visits.

Most patients agreed to participate after all ethical issues and purposes of the survey were explained in detail. Only a few refused to give consent, mainly because of lack of time and personal reasons. Patients not giving consent were excluded from the study and were replaced by new participants.

Questionnaire survey data was entered in Excel spreadsheets. It was checked and edited for errors. Thereafter, it was summarized and reported in Figures and Tables. Interview data was studied and the responses were grouped into classes expressing similar ideas. The interview data helped to complement and explain the questionnaire data.

RESULTS

Total number of 259 patients was included in the prospective study for a period of 4 months in a tertiary care service hospital. General information of the respondents is given in Table 1. The morbidity profile for which patients sought medical help is studied. Upper respiratory tract infections constitute the major proportion followed by illnesses related to gastrointestinal system to the least common diseases related to blood and musculoskeletal systems.

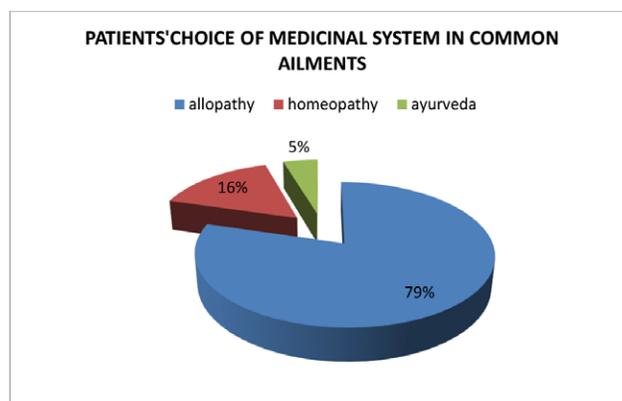
Table 1: General Information of the Respondents.

Age Distribution	No. of Respondents	% of Respondents
<25 Yrs.	67	25.87
25-45 Yrs.	141	54.44
>45 Yrs.	51	19.69
Total	259	100
Sex Distribution		
Male	175	67.57
Female	84	32.43
Total	259	100
Marital Status		
Married	160	61.78
Unmarried	99	38.22
Total	259	100
Socio-economic Status		
Above average	140	54.05
Below average	119	45.95
Total	259	100
Educational Background		
Illiterate	50	19.31
Primary	15	5.79
High school	75	28.96
Higher secondary and above	119	45.95
Total	259	100
Approximate Distance Travelled		
<5 Km	70	27.03
5-10 Km	39	15.06
>10 Km	150	57.92
Total	259	100

It appears that people prefer allopathic system for the management of various diseases they encounter. All the patients participated in the study had one-mind opinion that they prefer allopathic system in case of medical emergency. However, in case of common ailments they prefer other medicinal systems including Ayurveda and homeopathy. 172 (66.41%) respondents revealed the fact that they consulted allopathic Practitioners more than 3 times for diverse diseases they suffered last year. It is noticeable that only minority population (18.9%) enrolled in the study had consulted traditional medicine Practitioners during the last year. Moreover, a large group of patients, say around 62% never consulted a traditional system Practitioners during the last year, which indicates the familiarity of allopathic system among the patients attending Guwahati Medical College Medicine outpatient department.

Table 2: Various reasons of preference of allopathy among study population.

Reasoning behind the preference for allopathy	Number of patients with that opinion
Improvement of physical health with allopathy	67
Speedier action of allopathic medicine	30
Traditional medicine does not improve disease conditions	20
Availability of free medicines	5
Don't know	114
Reasoning behind the preference for traditional medicine systems	Number of patients with that opinion
Lack of side effects	15
Appropriate for common ailments	8

**Graph 1: Patient's choice of medicinal system in common ailments.**

One hundred and forty respondents (54.05%) are well aware of the alternative medicinal practitioners in their vicinity. But a huge group of 230 (88.8%) say that they cannot afford cost of traditional medicines. Besides this, they prefer allopathic system over other medicinal systems because of many reasons like easy improvement of physical health (25.86%), speedier actions of allopathic medicine (11.58%), lack of improvement of their health problems by using alternative medicinal system (7.72%) and availability of free medicines in the tertiary hospital they visit (1.93%). A very small percentage (8.88%) of people appealed that traditional system is best, because of the lack of side effects and suitability of traditional medicinal system in treatment of common ailments.

DISCUSSION

The interest in herbal and other traditional medicines and the usage of herbal or traditional system was rapidly growing in recent years.⁴ The main objectives of this study were to assess the knowledge and perceptions of

patients with respect to alternative systems of medicine. This was to understand the degree of awareness of commoners visiting outpatient departments of Guwahati Medical College whereas many developing countries totally or partially depend upon traditional and herbal medicines for alleviation of symptoms and cure.

Around 79% of total study population favors allopathic system of medicine whereas 21% considers alternative systems of medicine as better choice, 16% and 5% from homeopathy and Ayurveda respectively (Graph 1). However, the interesting finding in this study was that no respondent found who favor siddha medicine system which is contrary to the finding of a Tamil Nadu based study. Obviously, the difference is due to change of modality. Worldwide studies highlight the use of CAM alone and CAM with allopathic medicine by large majority of population,⁵ but results in present study are distinguished since only less than 1% considers CAM as best medicinal system.

Although earlier studies proved that, there exists a significant association between CAM practice and educational background and CAM practice and socio-economic position,⁶ present study proves that people prefer modern medicinal system irrespective of their educational background as well as socio-economic position.

It appears that people prefer allopathic system for the management of various diseases they encounter. 172 respondents revealed the fact that they consulted allopathic practitioners more than 3 times for diverse diseases they suffered last year. It is noticeable that only minority population (18.9%) enrolled in the study had consulted traditional medicine practitioners during the last year. Moreover, a large group of patients, around 62% never consulted a traditional system practitioner during the last year, which indicates the familiarity of allopathic system among the patients attending Guwahati Medical College outpatient departments.

Accessibility to alternative medicine practitioner was satisfactory as per the opinion of respondents; say about 54% people said that there are alternative medicine practitioners in their area. But 12.7% had no easy accessibility for the same. 29.3% are not at all aware about the service of alternative practitioners in their nearby areas.

During acute illness or medical emergency, patients alternatively use traditional medicinal systems and modern medicine systems hoping that a care will come from one or both of them.² Some studies proved

that Despite overall incline to herbal medications, the Allopathic scheme still relies the initial system up on which the people rely and Ayurveda in case of common ailments.⁷ Almost all the patients participated in the present study had one-mind opinion that they prefer allopathic system in case of medical emergency. However, in case of common ailments they prefer other medicinal systems including Ayurveda and homeopathy and the percentage of preference is 5% and 16% respectively.

Reasoning of the patients who supports allopathic and traditional medicine systems was checked. It is clear from the study that a large majority of people doesn't know why they prefer a medicinal system and what advantage a specific system can bring to him/her. Contemporary medication fetched some development in health problems but was unsuccessful to treat the primary problem.⁸ It is also worth noting that 26% people believe that modern medicinal system can improve their physical health considerably which differs considerably from the studies conducted.⁹ Even though a very small percentage of people appealed that traditional system is best, where a minority prefer it because of the lack of side effects, which strongly supports the former studies done earlier.^{10,11}

Studies that had already done over this matter brought out the general opinion of the public are tilting towards use of herbal drugs. The gradual rise in trade of these drugs in all over the world stands testimony to this. Public seems to be fed up with Synthetic drugs primarily because modern medicine give only indicative relief is experienced. 'Completion of treatment or complete cure from the disease' is not ever a certainty, more so in long-lasting illnesses. Earlier study¹² that frustrating side effects and high cost involved contributes a non-minor reason. But contrary to this the respondents of our study opinioned that they prefer allopathy since improvement of physical health experienced by the use allopathy, speedier action of allopathic medicine, availability of free medicines in government hospitals and unsatisfactory improvement in disease condition by the use of old-style medication.

CONCLUSION

It is clear from the study that traditional system of medicine didn't acquire its popularity among commoners in Assam even though many of the developed countries partially or fully support such medicinal systems. Patient education at the level of pharmacists or doctors regarding the implications of concomitant use of complementary medicines in case of at least chronic health issues is needed in the optimization of holistic healthcare in the country especially in Middle East India.

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ETHICAL APPROVAL

Institutional Ethics Committee of Gauhati Medical College and Hospital. No. MC/190/2007/Pt-1/47 dated 10 January 2021.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares there is no conflict of interest.

ABBREVIATIONS

CAM: Complementary and alternative medicine; **WHO:** World Health Organization; **TM:** Traditional Medicine; **AM:** Alternate Medicine; **OPD:** Outpatient Department.

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