

# INVESTIGATION ON THE USE OF TRADITIONAL MEDICINE BY MZUZU UNIVERSITY STAFF MEMBERS

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**ABSTRACT:** *There is general recognition of the use of traditional medicine alongside synthetic medicine to cure different diseases in primary health care at the global level. In Africa, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, 80% of the population uses traditional medicine to cure different diseases. In line with this trend, the researchers noted a steady increase in the use of traditional medicine among staff members at Mzuzu University, Malawi. This trend is contrary to the general belief that most 'educated' people have a negative attitude towards the use of traditional medicine as a solution to their health problems. This observation prompted researchers to investigate the use of traditional medicine among staff members at Mzuzu University in Malawi. The study used the social survey design, which used a questionnaire. Participants were purposively selected using snowball sampling to identify respondents of the study. The study revealed that some staff members use traditional medicine. Furthermore, findings show reasons such as promoting health, curing diseases and preventing diseases. Sources of information such as friends, colleagues and neighbours and family were frequently used in promoting knowledge about the use and awareness about traditional medicine. The study concludes that the use of traditional medicine is not only restricted among the rural population but also the literate population in higher education institutions. The study recommends that the Government of Malawi should formulate a policy, which will recognise traditional medicine in primary health care. The study also recommends libraries to develop collections on traditional medicine and continue documenting indigenous knowledge.*

**KEYWORDS:** *tradition medicine, indigenous knowledge, health solutions, Mzuzu University, Malawi.*

## BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

There is general recognition of the use of traditional medicine alongside synthetic medicine to cure different diseases in primary health care at global level Habtom (2018, 7); Nascimento, Medeiros, and Albuquerque (2018, 1); Oliver (2013, 1); Xue, Zhang, Lin, Da Costa, and Story (2007). In Africa, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, 80% of the population uses traditional medicine to cure different diseases. Statistics have equally revealed that the world trade on traditional medicine is above 60 billion dollars annually Tilburt and Kaptchuk (2008). Some of the reasons for the high use of traditional medicine in Africa are long distance travel to the nearest health centres, the unavailability of medicines in hospitals, health workers' attitudes towards patients, patients related factors such as the inability to pay for health care charges and social-cultural beliefs that put traditional medicine as superior over conventional medicine Mwaka, Okello and Orach (2015, 15). However, in a study conducted by Habtom (2015) in Eritrea, the findings revealed that despite the presence of health care and free medical facilities, patients still used traditional medicine.

In Malawi like many other African countries, the use of traditional medicine has been attributed to long distances to health care facilities, expensiveness of medicines and inaccessibility of medicines in hospitals Simwaka, Peltzer, and Maluwa-Banda (2007, 155). Simwaka et al. (2007, 155) state that although the use of traditional medicine is attributed to the challenges that the poor face in their bid to access health facilities, researchers have noted that university staff is widely using traditional medicine. The reasons behind this use

of traditional medicines in Malawi are not known among people who are close to facilities and who can afford to buy modern medicines.

Moreover, Mwaka et al. (2018, 10) state that there is need to carry out studies in order to document this information so that policy makers, as well as health professionals, can adapt the traditional medicine into the health facilities.

Therefore, the researchers carried out this study to contribute to the general welfare of primary health care in Malawi.

## AREA OF THE STUDY

The study was carried out at Mzuzu University which is the second largest public university in Malawi. It was created under the Act of Parliament of 1997. Its mandate is carrying out teaching, learning and research. The university has six faculties which are namely, Humanities and Social Sciences; Science, Innovation and Technology; Health Sciences; Environmental Sciences; Education; and Tourism and Hospitality.

The University has a library which has the responsibility of promoting traditional medicine through developing a collection which should be accessible to all users.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The World Health Organization's (2013, 55) strategy calls for all governments to promote and regulate traditional medicine in order to provide choice for users to decide whether to use traditional or modern medicine. However, traditional medicine lacks policy regulations and as such it still remains unrecognised by the Government of Malawi and the health professionals Simwaka et al. (2007, 160). In addition, The Pharmacy, Medicines and Poisons Board issued a statement warning users of traditional medicine to stop using them claiming that they are poisonous since they lack dosage specifications Malawi News Agency (2018, 1).

On the other hand, traditional medicine is widely being accepted in the Malawian community where 80 percent of the population uses it Simwaka et al. (2007, 156). In addition, the researchers have noted that some staff members at Mzuzu University are using traditional medicine. The differences in perception by Malawi Government and people in communities in Malawi on the use of traditional medicine, prompted the present researchers to study the use of traditional medicine at Mzuzu University and specifically to ascertain the use of traditional medicine among staff members, establish the purposes for which traditional medicine is used and also to determine the sources of information for staff who use traditional medicine.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

- To investigate use of traditional medicine by staff members at Mzuzu University

## SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

- To determine extent of use of traditional medicine among staff members at Mzuzu University
- To ascertain reasons for use of traditional medicine among members of staff at Mzuzu University
- To find out sources of information of traditional medicine among staff members at Mzuzu University

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study helps to create awareness on the importance of disseminating information about traditional medicine which is being used to cure different ailments by especially people working in institutions of higher learning. The study also highlights the recognition of traditional medicine among the learned community who are finding it to be an alternative to conventional medicine.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has limitations since it purposively selected its respondents to participate in the study. Therefore, the study findings cannot be generalised to all staff members in the university.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature clearly shows that traditional medicine is emerging as an alternative to conventional medicine in both developed and developing countries WHO (2013, 18). Estimates show that half the population of industrialised countries use traditional medicine while in the Africa nearly 80 percent of the population use traditional medicine for primary health care Habtom (2018, 7). A study carried out by Habtom (2018, 6) reveals that 57 percent of modern and medical traditional practitioners support the idea of combining modern and traditional therapies for certain types of diseases while 53 percent of modern medical practitioners agree to collaborate with traditional medical practitioners in carrying out research about certain diseases which the traditional system claim to provide healing. In Malawi, the use of traditional medicine has been reported by Simwaka et al. (2007, 155) who found that 70% of Malawians use traditional medicine while pointing out that the Government was taking time to recognise the traditional medicinal system.

The main reasons for using traditional medicine include curing diseases as well as protecting and promoting health physically, emotionally and mentally Habtom (2018, 12). Furthermore, the use of traditional medicine is associated with factors such as being cheap, where modern health facilities are not available and being effective in the treatment of various diseases Kassaye et al. (2007, 129-130). According to Simwaka et al. (2007, 55), the use of traditional medicine is associated with the high cost of medicines and inaccessibility of modern health facilities. According to Kassaye et al. (2007, 127), not much information is available to support policy formulation for enhancing the usage of traditional medicine. Mahish, Mahobia, and Yadav (2016, 174-178) conducted a study in India among the literate population and found that most of the literate populations were aware of and used traditional medicine just like the rural populations.

In another landmark study which Habtom (2018, 12) carried out in Eritrea among traditional medical practitioners to ascertain their perceptions on traditional medicines, findings also showed that major sources of knowledge for traditional medicine use are families which transfer the knowledge from one generation to another. Dambatta and Aliyu's (2012, 33) findings corroborate the findings of Habtom (2018) that most traditional medicine knowledge is tacit and is based in the minds of family members and is mostly difficult to transfer to other people. Chidimma and Tom's (2018, 371) findings revealed that respondents in the study highlighted word of mouth, radio, television, internet, newspaper, billboards and fliers as sources of information which promoted traditional medicine use. Mahish et al.'s (2016, 174-178) study found out that most of the literate population became aware of traditional medicine through television (39.13%) trailed by periodicals (30.43%), newspapers (26.08%) and seminars (21.74%).

## METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a social survey to "obtain information about people's actions, knowledge, intentions, opinions, and attitudes by means of self-report, that is, study participants respond to a set of questions" Polit & Beck (2010, 294). Polit and Beck (2010), mention that surveys can be used in different topics and for many purposes. The study employed snow ball sampling which enabled the researchers to identify respondents

who would in turn identify other respondents to participate in the study Sharma (2017). The study identified five respondents who were known by the researchers to have used traditional medicine. Five respondents assisted the researchers to identify four participants who in turn identified 11 participants to participate in the study. The identified respondents were given questionnaires to complete.

## FINDINGS

The study had 100 percent response rate since all 20 respondents answered their questionnaires and returned them to the researchers.

### Characteristics of respondents

**Table 1: Gender of respondents N=20**

Gender	Frequency
Male	15
Female	5

Table 1 above shows that there were 14 males and five females who participated in the study. These findings reveal that the study was mostly dominated by males when compared to women who participated in the study.

**Table 2: Level of education of respondents N=20**

Qualification	Frequency
Certificate	6
Diploma	5
Bachelor's degree	4
Master's degree	5
PhD	0
Total	19

As shown in Table 2 above, there were more respondents with certificates (6) followed by Diploma (5) and Master's degree (5), while those with Bachelor's degrees were four. These findings show that respondents had different qualifications from Master's degree to certificates level and that no one with a PhD participated in the study.

### Use of Traditional Medicine

Respondents were requested to tick yes or no if they use traditional medicine. Responses are as indicated in the table below.

**Table 3: Use of traditional medicine N=20**

Response	Frequency
Yes	14
No	6
Total	20

Table 3 above reveals that the majority of the respondents use traditional medicine as indicated by 14 (70%) respondents, while 6 indicated that they do not use traditional medicine. The information in this table reveals that most of the respondents use traditional medicine.

**Table 4: Frequency of use of traditional medicine N=20**

Period	Frequency
When unwell	6
Often	4
Sometimes	4
Never	4
Daily	1
Total	18

As indicated in table 4 above, more respondents indicated that they use traditional herbs when they are unwell or sick as represented by 6 (30%) respondents, followed by those that use it sometimes and often as represented by 4 (20%) respondents, while 4 (20%) respondents indicated that they have never used traditional medicine. On the other hand, 1 (5%) of the respondents indicated that they use traditional medicine on a daily basis.

### Reasons for Using Traditional Medicine

Respondents were asked to tick several responses in order to indicate their purposes of using traditional medicine.

**Table 5: Purposes of using traditional medicine N= 20**

Purpose	Frequency
For health promotion	9
For disease prevention	7
Cure	11
Never used	5

It can be noted from table 5 above that respondents' purposes of using traditional medicine was for curing illnesses, promotion of health, and disease prevention, while others indicated that they have never used traditional medicine. These findings reveal that most respondents used different types of traditional medicine for different purposes.

**Table 6: Attitude towards use of traditional medicine N = 20**

Attitude	Yes	No	Don't Know	Sometimes
Herbs have less side effects	12			
Cheaper using herbs	10	1	2	Not always
Herbs are safe	9	2	1	
Easier to access herbs than medicines	9	1	1	
Plants work better than pills	8	2	1	
I am accustomed to using herbs	5	3	1	
I feel uncomfortable using herbs	3	6	1	
Doctors or pills can't make me cure my illness	2	2	2	1

From table 6 above, users of traditional medicine had a positive attitude towards the use of traditional medicine as compared to modern medicine. Users stated that herbal medicine has less side effects, it is cheaper to use herbs, herbs are safe, and it is easier to access herbs than modern medicine. These findings show that there is higher preference of traditional medicine to modern medicine among staff members of the university.

### Sources of information for users of traditional Medicine

**Table 7: Sources of information for users of traditional medicine N = 20**

Sources of information	Frequency
Friends/Colleagues/Neighbours	17
Family	13
Social media (Facebook/WhatsApp)	12
TV/radio	10
Health practitioners	6
Books	6
Web	5
Attended Workshop	0

As can be seen in table 7 above, the most widely used source of information for users that use traditional medicine at Mzuzu University is friend/colleagues/neighbours as indicated by 17 (85%) respondents, followed by family as indicated by 13 (65%) respondents, and social media as indicated by 12 (60%) respondents, while TV and Radio was the fourth most used source of information for traditional medicine users. This was followed by books and health practitioners with 6 respondents (30%) indicating each and the remaining sources of information was the web with 5 (25%) respondents indicating this source. From the finding, it is noticeable that nobody attended a workshop to get information about traditional medicine. This finding shows that the users of traditional medicine share information to each other using peer groups, family members, social media, TV and Radio.

## DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

### Gender of respondents

The study established that there were more men as compared to women who participated in the study. This finding is similar to the one by Fonge et al. (2012) whose participants were dominated by males as compared to women. This suggests that women are underrepresented in economic activities as compared to men. This can be attributed to increased presence of men in economic activities when compared to women who in most cases fewer especially when it comes to employment in higher learning institutions.

### Qualifications

The study further revealed that the participants who participated in the study had different qualifications. This shows that participants with different qualifications reported to have used traditional medicine. These findings are contrary to the general belief that only rural people access traditional medicine as also educated people from higher learning institutions use traditional medicine.

### Use of traditional medicine

This study revealed that the majority, as represented by 14 (70%) of the respondents use traditional medicine, while 6 (30%) indicated that they have never used traditional medicine. This reveals that the use of traditional medicine is not restricted to rural people only, but this is also prevalent to urbanites as represented by

those from the university setting. These findings are in agreement with the findings by Mahish et al. (2016, 174-178) who found out that there was high use of traditional medicine and awareness among the literate population in India. This finding, therefore, should inform policy makers that even the educated members of the population use traditional medicine in their daily lives. A study by Xue et al. (2007) in Australia revealed a high usage of traditional medicines among users who were aged 18-34, female, employed, well-educated, had private health insurance coverage and had higher-than-average incomes.

### ***Reasons for using traditional medicine***

Traditional medicine is widely recognised for healing different diseases. Similarly, the study among other reasons established that respondents used traditional medicine for promoting health, for curing diseases, and for preventing diseases. It was also interesting to note that respondents expressed high preference for traditional medicine. Among the reasons that were cited include the fact that herbal medicine has less side effects, it is cheaper to use herbs, herbs are safe, and it is easier to access herbs than modern medicine. These findings are in agreement with Habtom (2018) who found out that in Eritrea, most respondents found traditional medicine to be more convenient if it was to be used alongside modern medicine.

### ***Sources of information for users of traditional medicine***

The effective use of traditional medicine requires that users be aware of the traditional medicine. However, traditional medicine users have information sources from the household level as reported by Dambatta and Aliyu (2012, 33) and Habtom (2018, 12) who found out that most of the traditional medicine information is found at household level and this is rarely shared. However, this study established that respondents indicated that they got information for using traditional medicine from colleagues, friends or neighbours, and this was followed by family members, followed by social media and then TV/Radio. This is partly in agreement with Chidimma and Tom (2018) who found out that there were several sources of information which assisted users to get awareness about traditional medicine. The findings seem to suggest that there is information sharing among staff members on the use of traditional medicine.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study concludes that the majority of the staff members as represented by 14 (70%) respondents who participated in the study use traditional medicine. Secondly, the study established that staff members use traditional medicine for various reasons such as preventing diseases, promoting health and curing diseases including high preference of staff members to traditional medicine as compared to modern medicine. Finally, the study noted that there is a lot of information sharing among the members of staff which is one way of promoting the use of traditional medicine.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- The government should take steps to recognise traditional medicine since it is being used even among the literate population in higher learning institutions
- Libraries should increase the development of library collections which can promote the use of traditional medicine to many members of the university community
- Libraries should take an active role of documenting much traditional medicine information which still remains tacit among traditional healers so that such information can help in curing diseases that can be effectively healed if there is adequate traditional information.

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