

ICT AND HEALTH FORUM

Topic: "The Role of ICTs in Promoting Herbal Medicines in Ghana"



Some herbal practitioners seated at the forum

The moderator for this month's health forum is Mr. OgoChwuku Nweke, a lecturer from the Africa University College of Communication. He said some people have wrong impression anytime there is the mention of herbal medicine. Unfortunately people turn to refer herbal medicine to the shrine and fetish.

If we have the opportunity to brand traditional medicine I believe it will help us as Africans to go a long way. He point out clearly that one of the problem with the traditional medicine practitioners is that they rather keep their herbs secret from authority.

He added that the program is organized by GINKS, which is a well known Ghanaian NGO(www.ginks.org) which promotes ICT for development in Ghana. Ogo stated that the program will change a lot of things especially the way herbal practitioners produce their herbal medicines. Ogo stated that the use of technology can help promote herbal medicine to a greater extend.

Giving the introductory and background of GINKS, the Executive secretary Mr. Ibrahim Inusah said he is happy to have a full house of herbal medicine practitioners for the first time to discuss and share knowledge on how ICTs can help promote, facilitate and enhance herbal medicine production in Ghana. He said GINKS is an NGO established in 2003 which is made up of individuals and organization and operates in some key thematic areas such as ICT in Education, ICT and Youth, ICT and Agric, ICT and Health and ICT and Gender. He said this is the first time GINKS is organizing such forums on health to engage traditional medicine practitioners in Ghana to discuss how ICT can help their work from preparation to packaging.

He added that GINKS also have an online platform that allows people to interact with each other and also do capacity building and help conduct research on ICT related topics. GINKS also publishes quarterly newsletters called iconnect which is a knowledge sharing newsletter for the dissemination of information to people without internet access.

The Moderator of the forum, Mr. Ogochukwu said there are lots of challenges marginalized in the traditional medicine practice but from today we will like you to see the work from the advantage point of view. He said for instance facilities that a medical doctor is exposed to also influence their way of practice. He said the orthodox medical practitioner also faces challenges of not getting the right description of the illness in full by patients among other things.

He said traditional medicine practitioners have advantage since they know the problem of the people right from the community level. How do we make traditional medicine a brand and why do we need to make a brand?. He noted that some people are beginning to dis-credit traditional medicine simply due to the fact that the packaging is not well done. Some practitioners turn to package their medicines in used plastic bottle, polythene bags etc and people do not buy them.

He said **Packaging** is very important and it is the science, art, and technology of enclosing or protecting products for distribution, storage, sale, and use. Packaging also refers to the *process* of design, evaluation, and production of packages. Packaging can be described as a *coordinated system* of preparing goods for transport, warehousing, logistics, sale, and end use. Packaging contains, protects, preserves, transports, informs, and sells. In many countries it is fully integrated into government, business, institutional, industrial, and personal use

Talking on the issue of branding, he stressed that practitioners can actually create brand out of whatever they produce and it is a very crucial step to take.

"Any time we want to make money, we have to invest money" OgoChukwu

OgoChukwu defined a **brand** as a "Name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers." *Branding* began as a way to tell one person's cattle from another by means of a hot iron stamp. A modern example of a brand is *Coca Cola* which belongs to the Coca-Cola Company and Pepsodent etc.

He mentioned also that Edmark is from Malaysia and their products which is mainly herbal medicines comes in very attractive packaging. The forever living products are not different from the herbal medicine produce locally in Ghana but the branding and packaging makes it different.

He said their packaging is good and people buy it worldwide. He urged the herbal practitioners to be mindful of packaging to improve and help sell their herbal products. Packaging is very important and need to have a voice, GHAFTRAM can form a pressure group to advocate for herbal medicine in Ghana . He said advocacy in itself is a political process by an individual or a

large group to influence public-policy and resource allocation decisions within political, economic, and social systems and institutions; it may be motivated from moral, ethical or faith principles or simply to protect an asset of interest. Advocacy can include many activities that a person or organization undertakes including media campaigns, public speaking, commissioning and publishing research or poll or the 'filing of friend of the court briefs'. Research is beginning to explore how advocacy groups use social media to facilitate civic engagement and collective action.



Ogo made it clear that, as traditional medicine practitioners, they should be able to document things right from their health centers. Documenting and recording activities in health can go a long way to help preserve knowledge for other generation of the family to benefit.

"if we gather our experiences and documents it, it can help other people to learn from it" Ogo

Giving an example of the fact that his mother used to treat him and the other siblings with traditional medicine and it works well and it is time to begin to advocate.

He said practitioners can even start an institute of herbal medicine and research and even form groups on social media platform such a facebook to talk more about their practice. Ogo said he noticed that in Africa the best way to give birth is standing.

Speaking on the topic, Prof. Dominic Edoh who is the Executive Director of Centre for Scientific Research into Plant Medicine (CSRPM)-Mampong starts his presentation with the observation that "animals in the bush do not die like human beings even though animals do not have hospitals but why do they live longer". He said the fact is that we all come from a village and we have use herbal medicine before in our life and it works.

He said in his quest to look for malaria vaccine in the world, he finally found one in a tribe in Tanzania. He always says traditional medicine is our way of life. He said his mother was sick and at the hospital she was given some orthodox as well as herbal medicines and she refused to take the herbal medicine for a reason.

His said his presentation will be based on Malaria as a common killer disease in Ghana and African. Malaria is a problem of the masses of people and it will continue to be a problem of tomorrow as there are many types of malaria. He revealed that that;

- *Malaria is still the most common disease presented at OPDs in Ghana*
- *80% of people in developing countries relies on Traditional Medicine and many developed countries combine Traditional Medicine and allopathic medicine*
- *Cryptolepis sanguinolenta (Lindl.) Schl (Periplocaceae) is preferred among many plants by Traditional Medicine Practitioners (MPs) and is used by CSRPM.*
- Much studies have been done on Crypto but has met challenges
- Difficulty of malaria treatment due to resistant parasites, misuse of dosage regimens, unavailability of plant parts, etc.

Malaria treatment started many years ago in Ghana and it started with the popular quinine. *Quinine* was the first effective treatment for malaria caused by *Plasmodium falciparum*, appearing in therapeutics in the 17th century. When people were dying from Malaria over the world, God gave Ghana a cure which was the quinine gotten from plant.

He said his institute (CSRPM) located at Mampong in the Eastern Region of Ghana also provide lots of support for the herbal practitioners.

- Drug resistance to chemotherapy
- Cost of developing new drugs
- WHO interventions; 1955, 1969-1976, 1998, 2000
- Need for safe and affordable anti-malaria due to Resistance to drugs especially chloroquine' (Oyedeki *et al.*, 2005) '
- Artemisin (from *Artemisia annua* and Quinine (from *Cinchona sp.*) (Nyarko 2009) as well as lead compounds for synthetic drugs (White, 2010).

Sometimes it is important to conduct small experiments to do certain things. Most people are dying from kidney problems lately and that has been blamed on herbal medicine without prove. We do all the experiment to testify whether it is safe or not. We should all accept the fact stated by WHO that 80% of people in developing countries rely on herbal medicine.

- 25% of drugs sold in pharmacies are herbal based
- In 2005 China made \$14 billion from herbal medicine

CHEMOTHERAPEUTIC CHALLENGES

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PROFILE OF MALARIA DRUGS RESISTANCE

Drug	Year Introduced	First Case of Resistance
Quinine	1632	1910
Chloroquine	1945	1957
Proguanil	1948	1949
Sulfadoxine-Pyrimethamine	1967	1967
Mefloquine	1977	1982
Atovaquone	1996	1996
Artemisinin	1972	1979

Research Report: **Source: WHO, 2003**

As a country it is important we take a look at some of these facts presented by the international organizations like WHO. Research is expensive but that does not mean we cannot do research. Observation is also important and some of the equipments we use in our research must be modern. He said people come over to Ghana to purchase herbal medicines produce by our practitioners and go back to re-package it and sell in dollars to us, so how do we compete with them? People can form groups to fight some of these attitudes and to improve upon our system using ICT tools.

Challenges

- Inadequate funding for research
- Old and obsolete equipments being used
- Inadequate infrastructure
- Public health challenges in terms of policy, safety, efficacy, quality access and rational use.
- Poor perception of public and policy makers on the importance of research
- Lack of collaboration: even in sub region

The foreigners pick our own herbal products and modify it and sell it to us by given it a name like **(ACTS)** and it is still expensive. There is more access to herbal medicine than the orthodox medicines which is a good access point but we don't value our own medicine.

we have to work as a team, we must collaborate to make things work, we can form a small mid-term factory and do some herbal powdered products etc.

- Intellectual Property Rights issues not been addressed.

IPR is a very crucial thing to consider doing. We have to educate the public to understand the importance of this rights.

"Our very own left over kenkey water is very medicinal but people have stop using it. We should be able to learn more. No matter the amount of kontomire(local vegetable i.e. cocoyam green leaves) one eats, one does not get sick. We should all try to do things in a better way. " Prof. Edoh



The Future Prospective

- **Advocacy**
- **Digitising patients records**

It is important we have an electronic system that will track the medical record of patients that attend herbal clinic on daily basis. Documentation will help practitioners solve a lot of upcoming problems and also to do more research. Telemedicine is very crucial for Africa, it is said to enable remote treatment and also serve as knowledge share platform for health professionals and must be encouraged.

- **Forecasting**

Many new diseases are coming and herbal practitioners should be able to forecast and even predict it. We should be able to forecast as herbal practitioners in our career life.

- **Data processing (analyses & inferences)**

If you have been recording patients health activities and record and later pick them over night, you will realise that ICT can help you to determine and improve dosage and treatment.

- **Information dissemination**

We should develop the habit of speaking out loud to reach out to a wider audience about what herbal medicine can offer the people of this nation

- **Preserving knowledge (documentation)**

"The problem we have as practitioners is that we don't want to sell our knowledge as we rather turn to protect it from others" Prof. Edoh

It is important to document our knowledge but try to protect the formation and if it becomes necessary patent those knowledge as a groups.

- **Networking (communication)**

We need to communicate, we need to network to expand the scope of operation.

- **Training**

Training is very crucial and that can be done in the form of knowledge sharing. Herbal Medicine Practitioners must be meeting periodically to share ideas so academia people like myself can help train others.

- **Automated equipments**

We must invest in some modern ICT equipments to help improve our productions which will help increase productivity and sales.

Recommendations

- Promotes knowledge, access to information & methodologies
- efficient solving of problems, strengthens linkages
- Training, exchange of fellows & skills development
- Saves time

In conclusion Prof. Edoh reminded practitioners that as with all research projects, some amount of patience is required in research networking. Quality research programmes take several years before they bear fruit. Networks will not offer an immediate cure, but by improving research productivity and greatly facilitate the research process.

President of GHAFTRAM, Agya Kwaku Appiah took the floor to share a word with practitioners at the forum. He said practitioners have come a long way and have a long way to go in their quest to provide herbal medicine to people.

He said Kidney problems is becoming prevalent and it is harshly blamed on herbal medicine and wonder how do practitioners clear the it from the public mind letting them know that it is not true. He reiterate that even according to the World Health Organization (WHO), 80% of people in developing countries uses herbal medicines but he is wondering if the public is aware of these.

Mr. Ogochukwu said he knows the challenges of herbal medicine practitioners are numerous but stressed that social media and ICT is making it possible for everyone to overcome those challenges faced by herbal medicine practitioners. He said for instance, in Kenya, doctors use tele-medicine to conduct research and also for cure.

"We know the problem practitioners have but ICT is the way forward to help curb such problems. The time we are in now, we should think of the need to seek for health information" 80% of people use traditional medicine not because they are poor but because they believe in it.
Ogo

Reactions from other participants

GINKS should help with the streamlining and advocacy for the promotion of the image of herbal medicine practitioners.

GHAFTRAM Director Nana Obiri, said GHAFTRAM is an obedient organization partly also because they mostly elderly and law abiding. He urges the authorities in Ghana to deal with them in a more responsible way.

"if ICT is changing our ways of life, we should do that diligently but for the regulators saying they are not registering our products means lot of products will be in the dark"

On the issue of packaging, the authorities are not trying to help with the appropriate channel and plead for help from experts.

We should believe in what we are doing and do it well. If herbal medicine is given kidney infection is very sad, we should make an effort to kill that message. Even orthodox medicine kills, so what are they trying to tell us..

Ogo said we should begin to look at how to push herbal medicine forward by the power of technology. He said opera Winfred call people to speak in America on some health issues and that is ICT. He urges participants to make use of their cell phones and believe in the possibility. They should create and put pictures of what they do on facebook. GINKS created facebook account on the spot for GHAFTRAM to be used as a tool to promote herbal medicine in Ghana.

In his closing remarks, the Coordinator of GINKS, Mr. Ibrahim Inusah thank the leaders of GHAFTRAM for the effort put in place to make sure they all attend the forum. He encourage them to employ the use of ICTs in their production process.