

# INNOVATIVE TRENDS IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

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## **Abstract**

*The human person has been confronted with fundamental health problems. These health challenges have led to the quest for various solutions. As a way to find a cure for diseases, the human person discovered the medical values of some plants and herbs which have curative potencies. African people were not left out in this quest to find solutions to the medical challenges of the human person and so we have African traditional medicine. African traditional medicine is a form of a holistic healthcare system that provides healthcare services based on culture, religious background, knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs that are prevalent in a particular African community. Also, Africans view illness as having both natural and supernatural causes and thus must be treated by both physical and spiritual means, using divination, incantations, animal sacrifice, exorcism, and herbs. Herbal medicine is the cornerstone of traditional medicine in Africa. With the aid of*

*hermeneutic and phenomenological methods in philosophy, this study discovers that the future of African traditional medicine is very bright if viewed in the context of service provision, an increase of healthcare coverage, economic potential, and poverty reduction. The study, therefore calls on African Heads of governments, NGOs, and all lovers of Africa to facilitate the formal recognition and integration of African traditional medicine into conventional medicine to engender both sound healthcare delivery and economic development.*

**Keywords:** African Traditional Medicine, Spirituality, Divination, Herbs, Healthcare

### **Introduction**

The instinct to survive is always prevalent in the mind of everyone who has faced the threat to his or her life. Health is the greatest wealth and as such people go to any length to preserve their health. Africans, like other races, have this instinct and inevitably that means of responding to health challenges. These means may be by divination, rituals, incantations, visions, trances, dreams, and the intervention of ancestral spirits. African traditional medicine has passed through various evolutionary stages, which Chike Ekeokpara has described as trial and error: “It is quite probable that man as soon as he has reached the stage of reasoning, found out through the process of trial and error that plants can be used as food, that some might be poisonous and may lead to death when eaten while some had medicinal value and power”.<sup>1</sup>

In this study, we shall focus on African Traditional Medicine with particular emphasis on its innovative trends. To do this we shall, first of all, explain some operational concepts and thereafter delve into the historical aspect of the traditional medicine in order to trace some important era in the life of African Traditional Medicine (ATM) and also to help us trace its evolution. Next, we will dwell a little on the influence of the religious aspect of the Africans on their Medical System. To get a clear picture of what ATM is about, we will survey the scope and science of ATM in these three aspects: Divination, Herbalism, and Spiritual Activities. The Innovations of the trends on ATM will be explored. The paper will end with a concluding reflection.

### **Traditional Medicine**

According to *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, traditional medicine is the total combination of knowledge and practices whether explicable or not used in diagnosing, preventing, or eliminating physical, mental, or social diseases. Traditional medicine refers to health practices, approaches, knowledge, and beliefs incorporating plant, animal, and mineral-based medicines, spiritual therapies, manual techniques, and exercises, applied singularly or in combination to treat, diagnose and prevent illnesses or maintain well-being.<sup>2</sup> It comprises medical aspects of traditional knowledge developed over generations within the folk beliefs of various societies before the era of modern medicine.<sup>3</sup> Traditional medicine could as well be defined as the total of knowledge, skills, and practices based on the theories, beliefs, and experiences indigenous to different cultures that are used to maintain health, as well as to prevent, diagnose, improve or treat physical and mental illnesses.<sup>4</sup> One can simply say that African traditional medicine is the African way of responding to health challenges in varied ways.

### **Historical Origin of African Traditional Medicine**

The development and use of traditional herbal medicine have a very long historical background that corresponds to the Stone Age. In the continent of Africa, the practice of traditional healing and magic is much older than some of the other traditional medical sciences and seems to be much more prevalent compared to conventional medicine. African traditional medicine is a form of holistic health care system that is organized into three levels of specialty, which include divination, spiritualism, and herbalism, though these may overlap in some situations. The first African that began the practice of African traditional medicine was **Sangoma** or spiritual healers as he was called.<sup>5</sup> He is from South Africa. There were lots of controversies among African scholars with regards to the inventor of African traditional medicine. A historian Mary Motley said ‘it was **Imhotep** from **Egypt** who started the practice of medicine in Africa’,<sup>6</sup> while some opposed the assertions made by this renowned historian. The first physician of the antiquity of any fame was the black Egyptian Imhotep, who lived about 2980BC during the third dynasty... and he was so highly thought of in his day that he was worshipped as a kind of god centuries after his

death. He cured physical and mental sickness. In later years' people slept in the shrine at his temple, dreamed of him, and went away cured.<sup>7</sup> Many scholars attributed African medicine to have originated from *Hippocrates*. Some said that Imhotep lived two thousand years before the Greek doctor Hippocrates who is called the father of medicine. It is an irony of history that African medical doctors are ignorant of the existence and contributions of Imhotep. It is evident that the ancient Egyptian medical practitioners employed both magical and scientific means. This is clear testimony against the views of some scholars who are unwilling to credit Africans with any discovery and who would not admit that African scholars were the originators of ideas and theories that modern scientists are still trying to understand.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Scope and Science of African Traditional Medicine**

Traditional African medicine is a range of traditional medicine disciplines involving indigenous herbalism and African spirituality, typically including diviners, spiritualists, and herbalists. Traditional medicine is viewed as a combination of knowledge and practice used in diagnosing, preventing, and eliminating diseases. This may rely on past experiences and observations handed down from generation to generation either verbally, frequently in the form of stories, or spiritually by ancestors or, in modern times, in writing. It has also been said that before attaining knowledge in traditional African medicine, one is often required to be initiated into a secret society, as many characteristics of this form of medicine can only be passed down to initiates. These practitioners claim to be able to cure a variety of diverse conditions including cancer, psychiatric disorders, high blood pressure, cholera, most venereal diseases, epilepsy, asthma, eczema, fever, healing of wounds, and burns.<sup>9</sup>

Diagnosis is reached through spiritual means and a treatment is prescribed, usually consisting of herbal remedy that is considered to have not only healing abilities but also symbolic and spiritual significance. Traditional African medicine, with its belief that illness is not derived from chance occurrences but through spiritual or social imbalance, differs greatly from modern scientific medicine which is technically and analytically based. Traditional medicine was the dominant medical system for millions of people in Africa before the arrival of the Europeans who introduced

science-based medicine, which was a noticeable turning point in the history of the tradition and culture.<sup>10</sup>

### **Herbal Medicine**

Herbal medicine is a part and parcel of and sometimes synonymous with African traditional medicine. It is the oldest and still the most widely used system of medicine in the world today. It is used in all societies and is common to all cultures. Herbal medicines, also called botanical medicines, vegetable medicines, or phytomedicines, as defined by World Health Organization (WHO) refers to herbs, herbal materials, herbal preparations, and finished herbal products that contain whole plants, parts of plants, or other plant materials, including leaves, bark, berries, flowers, and roots, and/or their extracts as active ingredients intended for human therapeutic use or other benefits in humans and sometimes animals.<sup>11</sup> Herbal medicine is a special and prominent form of traditional medicine, in which the traditional healer, in this case, known as the herbalist, specializes in the use of herbs to treat various ailments. Their role is so remarkable since it arises from a thorough knowledge of the medicinal properties of indigenous plants and the pharmaceutical steps necessary in turning such plants into drugs such as selection, compounding, dosage, efficacy, and toxicity. The use of herbal medicines appears to be universal in different cultures. However, the plants used for the same ailments and the modes of treatment may vary from place to place. The plants used for medicinal purposes are generally referred to as medicinal plants, that is, any plant in which one or more of its organs/parts contain substances that can be used for therapeutic purposes, or in a more modern concept, the constituents can be used as precursors for the synthesis of drugs. For example, some plants have been used in traditional medicine for many years without scientific data to back up their efficacy. In this case, these plants, whole or parts, which have medicinal properties, are referred to as crude drugs of natural or biological origin. They may further be classified as “organized drugs,” if such drugs are from plant parts with cellular structures such as leaf, bark, roots, etc., and “unorganized drugs,” if they are obtained from acellular portions of plants such as gums, balsams, gels, oils, and exudates. Compared with modern allopathic medicine, herbal medicine is

freely available and can easily be accessed by all. As a result, there is limited consultation with traditional healers because there is a fairly good knowledge of common curative herbs especially in the rural areas except in the case of treatment of chronic diseases. Even where consultation is done, there is a lack of coherence among traditional healers on the preparation procedures and correct dosage of herbal medicines. However, according to WHO, at least 80% of people in Africa still rely on medicinal plants for their health care<sup>12</sup>. In Nigeria, and indeed, entire West Africa, herbal medicine has continued to gain momentum, some of the advantages being low cost, affordability, availability, acceptability, and apparently low toxicity.

### **Illness**

In an African traditional setting, there was always an explanation as to why someone was suffering from a certain disease at a particular time. Illness is believed to be of natural, cultural, or social origin. Cultural or social illness is thought to be related to supernatural causes such as angered spirits, witchcraft, or alien/evil spirits, even for conditions now known to be well understood in modern medicine such as hypertension, sickle-cell anemia, cardiomyopathies, and diabetes. African traditional beliefs consider the human being as being made up of physical, spiritual, moral, and social aspects<sup>13</sup>. The functioning of these three aspects in harmony signified good health, while if any aspect should be out of balance, it signified sickness<sup>14</sup>. Thus, the treatment of an ill person involves not only aiding his/her physical being but may also involve the spiritual, moral, and social components of being as well. Many traditional medical practitioners are good psychotherapists, proficient in faith healing (spiritual healing), therapeutic occultism, circumcision of the male and female, tribal marks, treatment of snake bites, treatment of whitlow, removal of tuberculosis lymphadenitis in the neck, cutting the umbilical cord, piercing ear lobes, removal of the uvula, extracting a carious tooth, abdominal surgery, infections, midwifery, and so on. According to Kofi-Tsekpo, the term “African traditional medicine” is not synonymous with “alternative and complementary medicine<sup>15</sup>.” African traditional medicine is the African indigenous system of health care and therefore cannot be seen as an alternative.

## **Diagnostics**

The medical diagnoses and chosen methods of treatment in traditional African medicine rely heavily on spiritual aspects. There is a belief among the practitioners of traditional healing that the ability to diagnose and treat illnesses is a gift from God. Rather than looking for the medical or physical reason behind an illness (or a spell of bad luck), traditional healers attempt to determine the root cause underlying it, which is believed to stem from a lack of balance between the patient and their social environment or the spiritual world. In other words, supernatural causes, not natural are attributed to illnesses. According to the type of imbalance the individual is experiencing, an appropriate healing plant will be used, which is valued for its symbolic and spiritual significance as well as for its medicinal effect.

When a person falls ill, a traditional practitioner uses incantations to make a diagnosis. The incantations are thought to give an air of mystical and cosmic connections.<sup>16</sup> Divination is typically used if the illness is not easily identified, otherwise, the sickness may be quickly diagnosed and a remedy prescribed. Sometimes the practitioner will advise the patient to consult a diviner who can give a diagnosis and recommend a treatment. It is believed that contact with the spirit world through divination often requires not only medication but sacrifices.<sup>17</sup>

## **Treatment**

Traditional practitioners use a wide variety of treatments ranging from standard medical treatments to be pseudoscientific and magical. Treatments may include fasting, dieting, herbal therapies, bathing, massage, surgical procedures, among others. Examples of pseudoscientific treatments include; the use of bleed-cupping, followed by herbal ointment and herbal drugs to treat migraines, coughs, abscesses. A steaming mixture of herbs is both inhaled and consumed in the treatment of malaria. Fevers are often treated using a steam bath. The fat of a boa constrictor is used to treat gout and rheumatism and is thought to relieve chest pain when applied topically. Animals are also sometimes used to transfer the illness to afterward or for the manufacture of medicines for zoo therapy. For example, the bones of baboons are used to treat arthritis.

### **Divination**

Divination means consulting the spirit world. It is a method by which information concerning an individual or circumstance of illness is obtained through the use of randomly arranged symbols to gain healing knowledge<sup>18</sup>. It is also viewed as a way to access information that is normally beyond the reach of the rational mind. It is a transpersonal technique in which diviners base their knowledge on communication with the spiritual forces, such as the ancestors, spirits, and deities. It is, therefore, an integral part of an African traditional way of diagnosing diseases. The “spirit world” is consulted to identify the cause of the disease or to discover whether there was a violation of an established order from the side of the sick person. This is established through the use of cowry shells, throwing of bones, shells, money, seeds, dice, domino-like objects, or even dominos themselves, and other objects that have been appointed by the diviner and the spirit to represent certain polarities on strips of leather or flat pieces of wood. The divining bones that form the large majority of the objects include bones from various animals such as lions, hyenas, ant-eaters, baboons, crocodiles, wild pigs, goats, antelopes, etc. The bones represent all the forces that affect any human being anywhere, whatever their culture. Because of the revealing powers of divination, it is usually the first step in most African traditional treatment and medicine.

### **The spiritual perspective of ATM**

Spiritual-based cases are handled in the following manner:

**Spiritual protection:** If the cause of the disease is perceived to be an attack from evil spirits, the person would be protected by the use of a talisman, charm, amulets, specially designed body marks, and a spiritual bath to drive the evil spirits away. These are rites aimed at driving off evil and dangerous powers, spirits, or elements to eliminate the evils or dangers that may have befallen a family or community.

### **Physical perspectives of ATM**

If the illness is physical, the following approaches are exploited:

**Prescription of herbs:** Herbs are prescribed to the sick person according to the nature of the illness. Each prescription has specific

instructions on how to prepare the herb, the dose, dosing regimen, and timeframe.

**Clay and herbs application:** The application of a mixture of white clay with herbs may be relevant in some of the healing processes. The mixture is applied to the entire body for several days, especially in the case of skin diseases. The view is that the human body is made out of dust or ground; therefore, if the body has any problem, you would have to go to where it came from to fix it. The use of clay with some special herbs is also sometimes used for preventive rituals to ward off the evil spirits responsible for the illness.

### **Innovative Trends in the African Traditional Medicine**

With the advent of Colonialism which in turn brought about the Westernization of most African countries, the practice of ATM, first of all, went on a downward trend, especially during the colonial period, as earlier pointed out. The importance of traditional medicine, however, dwindled during the colonial period, whereby it was viewed as inferior to Western medicine. It was thus banned completely in some countries due to its association with witchcraft /voodoo, supernatural, and magical implications, in which case, it was also termed “juju” (Nigeria) or “native medicine,” since it made use of charms and symbols which were used to cast or remove spells.

Change is always constant and one can hardly stop change. Due to the advancement in technology and development in society and around the globe, ATM has remained in the dark but has evolved, undergone, and still undergoing, some innovation and this modern use of ATM is becoming a trend. Firstly, the number one innovation in the ATM is the evolution of Herbalism. This is because Herbalism was easily and widely imbibed by Christians and the greater percentage that accepted westernization, others who seem to practice the other aspects of the System are seen as heathen. This does not mean that the Divination and Spiritual facets of ATM are not practiced, but have not seen much innovation than their counterpart – Herbalism. This having been said, we categorized these innovative trends into two broad classes or types in order to treat them to the best of our efforts. This

classification was done based on the practicality and how imminent the innovation is in our society.

### **Societal Induced/ Paradigm and Innovative Trends in ATM**

This class of trend came about because of the development of society. For the sake of clarity; in the past, our forefathers used clay pots to eat because that was the most sophisticated utensil for them to use, but right now everyone uses either ceramic plates or stainless plates. This paradigm shift also affects the world of ATM. In a way, to make this class of innovations explicit, it should be noted that the innovations in this class do not affect fundamentally, how the ATM is practiced but the output and product of the ATM. Some of these changes or innovations are:

**Herbalist Modern Clinic:** People now build and establish firms that claim to treat diseases through herbal methods and in the traditional way. Examples of such are Baba Ijebu, Yemtech International, Papa na Mama Chukwuebuka, etc. They are spread all over the continent.

**Use of Modern Medical Facilities:** Some of these firms now use some modern medical machines to determine what is happening to the patient and no longer the guesswork of which the traditional herbalist are seemingly accused.

**Advertisement and Packaging:** The method of packaging of the ATM drugs are no longer primitive, but are now packaged in modern ways and properly labeled. Also, they are properly advertised all over the media, including newspapers.

### **Novel / Futuristic Innovation in the African Traditional Medicine**

The African Traditional Medicine System is guilty of major setbacks or loopholes two of which are: **Data-Oriented and Research Oriented.** The novel innovations try to solve these problems or loopholes by making the ATM system pass through some highly sophisticated measures.

### **Database and Information Oriented Innovation**

One of the traits that make the Western Medical System progressive, is “Effective Data Management” – records of drugs, patients, doctors, health history, research, etc. This makes western medicine so effective because there is a kind of follow-up or wealth of sure information about particular diseases and their remedy, or about a particular medicine and how it works. In recent times, a profound effort has been made to incorporate this effective Data Management into the African Traditional Medicine System. An example of such efforts is pointed out by Razieh Mirzaeian, Farahnaz Sadoughi, Shahram Tahmasebian, Morteza Mojahedi in their research called *Progresses and Challenges in the Traditional Medicine Information System: A Systematic Review*.<sup>19</sup> Traditional Medicine is experiencing its rapid advancements era based on health information technology. Modern and technology-based techniques are vital for controlling and maintaining the quality of herbal drugs.<sup>20</sup>

### **Creation of Traditional Medicine Database or Information System (TMDB OR TMIS)**

The creation of a database for storing a large portion of the data and their transformation into useful data has effectively contributed to the progress of TMIS.<sup>21</sup> This is a database that collects and stores data from many sources and is reserved for further usage. This database spans throughout the whole continent and beyond. China’s Comprehensive Herbal Medicine Information System for Cancer (CHMIS-C) has served as an appropriate information resource for TM researchers. In the same way, Web-based Decision Support System for Prescription in Herbal Medicine in Nigeria has played a significant role in controlling the quality of herbal drugs prescription.<sup>22</sup>

The creation of TMDB is one of the main signs of progress achieved in the field of TM. Being common in China and India, this system has specifically been designed to support the decision-making system and data mining and processing. There are a lot of databases in TM. Traditional Chinese Medicine database (TCMID) is the most comprehensive database in use in China representing remarkable advances in information integration. Besides the combinations of the herbs, this database provides the

three-dimensional structures of the herbal combination for research use.

There is Universal Standardization of Traditional medicine all over the world as encouraged by WHO. Nowadays, different nations have recognized the critical function of the standards in promoting the levels of quality, safety, validity, and efficacy. These factors form the underlining of TM policies and plans. As a result, some nations have made effort to take effective steps towards the development of the TM knowledge base through sharing information on the regulatory strategies.

### **The Clinical Data Ware House (CDW) of Traditional Medicine**

There is also the clinical aspect to this data management. As one of the most significant TM information resources, CDW is a technical strategy used for storing, managing, and processing mass data. CDW integrates the data of the structured electronic medical record (SEMR) to be used for both the medical knowledge discovery and clinical decision system (CDS) in TM. In 2002, China created the TCM Electronic Medical Record (EMR) (TCM-EMRD). This database contains more than 3500 electronic medical records relating to the in-patients. It includes the data of TCM clinical practice on the inpatient including the TCM diagnosis and the description of the concepts, symptoms, and formula of the herbal medicines. There are also discovery tools for TM modernization as a strong tool for knowledge acquisition from the data repository. Data mining has found application in nearly all TM areas. Technically, it serves as a support for the TM modernization process<sup>23</sup>.

The essence of these databases and information management is to solve the problem of information deficiency and sloppiness. Those who practice the ATM in this modern era can now have a body or a place or a well of information they can consult while carrying out their work. It also eliminates the problem that comes with individuation as a result of differences in culture and language, one can have access to another information that is not of his culture and the person will understand clearly what he is to do because the information in the database is written in such a way that everyone in the field of ATM understands it well.

However, Sometimes, one medicinal plant happens to be named differently using the general, Latin, local, or commercial names. In contrast, some others of different species take similar names. This becomes more complicated given the prevalence of the terminology specific to different world languages. Currently, there is no universal terminology and a unified coordinated regulatory attitude. To standardize the structured clinical data, integration of the systematic terminologies is required. Therefore, the innovation of ICTM becomes a savior to ATM. Accordingly, in line with the information standardization projects such as the International Classification of Traditional Medicine (ICTM), a new project for the compilation of an international standard terminology has been incorporated into the recent ICD programs.

There has been a clarion call for the integration of ATM and Western Medicine even by the World Health Organization. A clear example is in **Kwa-Mhlanga**, South Africa, a 48-bed hospital that combines traditional African medicine with homeopathy, iridology, and other Western healing methods, as well as traditional Asian medicine. The WHO is trying its best to facilitate the global standardization of TM and herbal medicines. Accordingly, in its planned strategy, it has attempted three goals, namely constructing a database and compiling national policies, promoting the safety, quality, and efficacy of the TM services through laws and standards establishment, and integrating the TM services and self-medication into the national health system. Up to now, the majority of the relevant works using the clinical record of TM have been based on well-structured data of prescriptions extracted and organized manually. This method of data collection is highly time-consuming and cumbersome making the provision of enough data required for achieving reliable knowledge impossible.

Developing a unique information system in TM capable of supporting a huge volume of nonhomogeneous data and information is considered an intriguing progress in TM modernization. The collected information is used for both pattern recognition that is the main concept of diagnosis in TM and the treatment technique that may be herbal medicine prescription, acupuncture, and other similar practices.<sup>24</sup>

Having seen how data management information innovation in ATM has solved, the problem of lack of adequate information in ATM enabled us to see the innovations made on the side of Research.

### **Research Oriented Innovations**

Since traditional medicine is now gaining ground in this modern era, there is now an increase in the study of its related courses which has always been in the background, or new courses have been created to ensure close research on the traditional medical system. Such include *Ethno Botany and Phyto medicine*. Ethnobotany is the study of a region's plants and their practical uses through the traditional knowledge of local culture and people.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, Phytomedicine can be defined as the study of herbal medicine with therapeutic and herbal properties. Herbal medicine, or a phytopharmaceutical preparation, can be defined as medicine derived exclusively from the whole plant or parts of plants and manufactured in crude form or as a purified pharmaceutical formulation.<sup>26</sup>

### **Concluding Reflections**

The place of African Traditional Medicine in the lives of the Africans is not to be doubted. Even though the African man is accused of imbibing westernization, the inkling towards African Traditional Medical practices has not ceased. A clear example of this claim was the experience during the outbreak of Covid-19 in 2020. It was obvious that the western system of medicine offered no hope to the masses and this led to a massive return to the use of herbs and traditional means of obtaining medical care, which made ATM a beacon of light where other modes or systems of medicine have seemingly failed. The greatest development is that some who are not even African by any means are welcoming the ATM medical system because of its efficiency when used and well-practiced. In the era where everyone is advised to cut down on industry-produced equipment, the quest for natural and organic things is now in high demand, likewise that of health issues.

Some of the problems of ATM which these innovations, as stated above, have made efforts to solve, will make the practice of African Traditional Medicine topnotch and establish a very

effective system of curing and giving out medical services. The importance of ATM is now laid bare for all to try and benefit from, as natural herbs and plant extracts are gifts from nature which it has given freely from its benevolence. This is a clarion call for the African man to preserve his environment, to ensure the availability of such herbs and precious natural products around us daily. These natural products are not far from us: they are all around us, only if we can utilize them well.

In sum, it should be noted that with the rate at which ATM is undergoing serious innovations, there will be a radical or complete paradigm shift from the demand of Western Medical System to Traditional System. Besides, some people see ATM as an alternative to Western medicine, but that notion is about to change in today's world. The African Traditional Medicine is a complete System of medicine itself that is different from that of the westerners and particular to Africans.

## Endnote

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<sup>12</sup>ibid

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<sup>14</sup>ibid

<sup>15</sup>Ibid

<sup>16</sup>R. Onwuanibe, *"The Philosophy of African medical practice"* (Enugu: Wisdom Press, 2019) 67.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Op. cit.

<sup>19</sup>R. Mirzaeian, "Progresses and challenges in the traditional medicine information: a systematic review" *Journal of Pharmacy & Pharmacognosy Research*, 7 (4), ISSN 0719-4250 (2019) .246-259,

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid

<sup>22</sup> ibid

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<sup>25</sup>Ethnobotany, in [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com) (Accessed 07/05/2021)

<sup>26</sup>Phytomedicine, in [www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com) (Accessed 07/05/2021)