

Traditional healers fight for recognition in South Africa's AIDS crisis

The prominent AIDS activist group Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) is finding itself at the center of a controversy as South Africa's traditional healers clamor for greater recognition of their value in treating HIV/AIDS.

In late November, protesters representing South Africa's Traditional Healers' Organisation (THO) marched to the TAC offices, chanting slogans against the TAC, pharmaceutical companies and the media for downplaying the role of traditional medicines in fighting AIDS.

The spat highlights a major issue in South Africa: deciding what role traditional healers and medicines should play in an epidemic that afflicts about 5.1 million people in the country.

Shunned by former governments, traditional healers are now being increasingly recognized, particularly in rural areas where conventional health care is scarce or expensive. Their influence is significant: the Department of Health says as many as 70% of South Africans consult the country's estimated 200,000 healers.

To regulate this, the government in September passed the Traditional Healers' Bill, giving practitioners legal recognition, but restricting them from diagnosing or treating HIV/AIDS or any other terminal disease. South Africa's Medical Research Council (MRC) also has a dedicated research unit for testing traditional medicines.

But the THO is charging that the TAC, which campaigns for equitable and affordable access to AIDS treatments, is overlooking traditional remedies. Phepsile Maseko, the THO's national coordinator, says although some traditional healers are members of the TAC, the group only promotes



A majority of South Africans rely on traditional healers and medicines.

James Watson

'modern medicines.' "We want them to stop the monopoly [of the drug companies] and consider other forms of medicines," Maseko says.

The TAC, led by the iconic Zackie Achmat, has been the country's most effective voice of opposition against the government's slow reaction to the AIDS crisis. As an organization with substantial reach, Maseko says, the TAC has a responsibility to ensure that all alternatives are known to the public.

The TAC agrees that traditional healers can be important in fighting AIDS, particularly as a source of accurate information and psychological support. The group is also willing to consider any medicine proven to be safe and effective, but this has not been forthcoming for traditional medicines, says TAC national manager Nathan Geffen. "We have not received a single bit of evidence

from the THO of a traditional medicine with safety and efficacy for treating AIDS," he says.

Among the THO's supporters are the Rath Foundation and South African health minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, who advocate using multivitamins to treat AIDS. Msimang has slammed the media for not giving enough coverage to the role of multivitamins.

The MRC is reviewing ten remedies that claim beneficial health effects for AIDS but no traditional medicines have yet been approved, notes Motlalepula Gilbert Matsabisa, head of indigenous knowledge systems at the agency. Seven remedies have gone through preclinical testing, and two have successfully completed phase 1 trials. Phase 2 trials are set to begin in February.

Some traditional medicines may prove effective, but their use must be carefully monitored, says Eric Goemaere, head of Médecins Sans Frontières' South African mission. For instance, some patients are known to mix their antiretroviral drugs with traditional remedies, which could have unexpected side effects.

"Unfortunately, a huge majority of traditional healers are using a type of treatment that incites diarrhea and vomiting, because the traditional approach is to get the sickness out," adds Goemaere. "This can be very dangerous."

But there is no doubt that traditional healers have an important role to play, he says. "No patient that we see has not gone to a traditional healer first—it's a mandatory first step," he says. "We would like to make an alliance with them, as they can provide a useful complementary role."

James Watson, London

Europe's new policies bail out ailing pharma companies

Emulating policies in the US, Europe is stepping up with new initiatives intended to close 'the pharmaceutical gap' created by its regulatory policies and a fragmented market.

Because market prospects often drive pharmaceutical research, companies neglect diseases that affect few people or that are endemic only in developing countries. This approach is particularly acute in Europe, where cumbersome regulations have discouraged pharmaceutical innovation.

Last year, the European Medicines Agency (EMA) adopted several policies—such as accelerated, provisional and compassionate-use drug approval—that have been available for years at the US Food and Drug Administration. "There is an enormous amount happening," says Martin Harvey, a spokesperson for the EMA.

Since November, the EMA has been

accepting applications for drugs to treat AIDS, cancer, diabetes and neurodegenerative disorders. This list will grow longer in 2008 to include immune disorders and other infectious diseases. The advantage to pharmaceutical companies, says Harvey, is that EMA approval allows them to market drugs throughout the European Union—with a total population of 470 million—without having to clear regulatory hurdles in each country.

But some scientists say the changes only begin to bridge the huge pharmaceutical gap, where an estimated 90% of global diseases—including rare disorders—go untreated.

In 2000, the EMA implemented an orphan drug act; the European Commission has also supported programs on rare diseases over the years. But "in my opinion, [those schemes] are not enough," says Alain Fischer, director of the French Institute for Rare Diseases Research.

Fischer says academics will have to take greater initiative on treatments for unmet needs.

Fischer and his colleagues have launched the European Rare Disease Therapeutic Initiative in partnership with four major pharmaceutical companies. If the initiative approves a proposal, the companies will search their libraries for compounds requested in the proposal and supply them. The researchers would then negotiate further drug development with the companies.

The new initiatives fall in line with a World Health Organization report released in November that urged the European Commission to fund research on new treatments and called for greater public-private partnerships. It also urged governments to create incentives for companies to invest in neglected diseases.

➔ <http://www.erditi.org>

Gunjan Sinha, Frankfurt