



Integrating traditional medicines into Western medical treatment

Traditional medicines have been used for thousands of years by Indigenous people in Canada, with demonstrated efficacy in treating a wide range of health issues. Many of the medicines in contemporary biomedical treatments are derived from plants and herbs used by Indigenous people throughout the world. There has been little research done, however, on the integration of traditional knowledge-based treatments with Western biomedical treatments.

In recent years, researchers have begun to examine the chemistry of plants used by contemporary healers and Elders to treat various illnesses. Their projects have confirmed that traditional medicines exhibit chemical properties that can effectively and safely treat illness. Researchers have also tested the safety of traditional medicines when used in combination with biomedical-based treatments.

The World Health Organization¹ (WHO) defines traditional medicine as “the sum 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.” Traditional medicines are not simply a “thing of the past,” or the mechanism of dealing with illness before the introduction of Western medicine. Traditional medicines are still first-line healthcare for 75 percent of the world’s population. As people around the world adapt to changes in lifestyle, the environment, and climate, certain illnesses rise and fall in incidence while new diseases arise. Elders and healers adjust to these changes by finding new medicines and adapting existing ones.

An example of such an adaptation is the treatment of type 2 diabetes by Cree Elders in northern Quebec (James Bay area). The Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) has funded the Team in Aboriginal Anti diabetic Medicines² (TAAM), which aims to alleviate the effects of type 2 diabetes through a rigorous scientific evaluation of traditional medicines used by Elders and healers. The purpose of the project is not to create new Western medicines, but to combine traditional knowledge and Western medical practices for the treatment and prevention of diabetes.

The TAAM research group, headed by Dr. Pierre Haddad, uses an innovative multidisciplinary approach combining the ethnobotanical knowledge of Cree Elders and healers with phytochemistry, cell-based bioassays, animal models, toxicology tests, nutritional strategies, and clinical research. The research is ongoing, but so far the team has demonstrated that several plants used by the Cree to prevent and treat type 2 diabetes are high in phenolic antioxidants, help regulate blood glucose levels, and influence fat metabolism. Central to the success of this large research program is the involvement of the community throughout the research process. The collaborative delivery of traditional and Western



