STUDY INTO HIV TREATMENT

Traditional medicine's big day

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In a world first, a clinical study to determine the effectiveness of traditional medicine in treating HIV infected people will commence at Edendale Hospital in Pietermaritzburg next month, scientists announced at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) and Missouri University (MU) yesterday.

The nearly two-year study will investigate whether the medicinal plant, Rutherfordia ornata, is known locally - will slow down the progression of the virus in 124 infected patients who do not medically qualify for ARV treatment in South Africa.

The study came from fruition after a 10-year collaboration between UWC and MU scientists who formed the International Centre for Indigenous Phytotherapy Studies (TICIPS) in 2005. It is led by Nicholas Wilsen, head of the Department of Medicine at Edendale Hospital, and MU professor Kathy Goggin, and funded by the United States National Centre for Complementary and Alternative Medicine. TICIPS co-directors Quinton Johnston, of the UWC and RA Herbal Science and Medicine Institute, and Bill Felix at MU's school of medicine, said that it was the body's primary mission to conduct scientifically ethical and rigorous research on indigenous phytotherapies (plants, shrubs, floral extracts or essential oils) and their use in combating HIV/AIDS, TB and cancer.

The research was important as South Africa had more than 23,000 plant species, of which 4,000 were used medicinally and 80% of its population consumed more than 200,000 traditional healers for their health needs, they said.

KEN Health MRC Preggy Nkselepi yesterday highlighted the efforts to explore the uses of traditional medicine.

She said she looked forward to the results of this study as traditional medicine received much ridicule when it was suggested as being beneficial in the treatment of HIV/AIDS.

The Medical Research Council (MRC), traditional healers and scientists at the universities of KwaZulu-Natal and Cape Town have also contributed to the study.

"We need to be very receptive of scientists and that all they wanted was to reveal our knowledge, but I see that our objective, in the sense, we want to see live trials," said Derrick Ethushele of the Pietermaritzburg traditional healers and provincial coordinator for traditional healers and the provincial department.

Traditional healers were invaluable in translating English language concepts into Zulu and telling the scientists how people prepared themselves when they fell ill.

Nkselepi was not a registered doctor and did not need a prescription, which meant that traditional healers would continue administering it to HIV-positive patients if the study's hypothesis was correct.

MRC president Anthony Mbewo said it was "unfathomable" why some civil society groups had a problem with traditional medicines, which had a history stretching back more than 1,000 years.

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