Country Monograph on National System of
Traditional Alternative Medicine

Maldives

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Introduction:

The Republic of Maldives is a nation composed of a group of islands. For administrative purposes, it is divided into 20 Atolls. These atolls contain 197 inhabited and 993 uninhabited islands. All these islands are low lying, flat coral islands, spread out over, 115,300 Square kilo meters. The total land area is less than 300sqkm. Most of the islands have a population of less than 500 people.

Islands with a total population of more than 700 have health centers and hospitals which provide the health care facilities for the island community. The hospitals have facilities for specialties such as obstetrics and gynecology, general surgery, anesthesia, orthopedics, medicine, pediatrics and radiology. The less populated islands have health posts which are manned by a community health worker assisted by a family health worker and a midwife.

Many islanders from various islands demand better quality health facilities and comfort in their lives which is a challenge the government faces. Several meetings with the island communities and their representatives have been conducted to enlighten them of the magnitude of the work which needs to be undertaken in order to fulfill their demands.

There has been a global upsurge in the use of Herbal/ Traditional/ Complementary/ Alternative Medicine, both developed and developing countries, in the last decade.
Maldives need to develop our existing system of traditional medicine by propagating and disseminating the knowledge of it. At present, only very few people practice this knowledge and most of them are very old. We must ensure that our ancient knowledge is not lost in the oblivion with the passage of time. Even though revival of our traditional medicine system has become a necessity, we do not have a system where qualified tutors teach their skills and knowledge to those interested from the younger generation.

With the incorporation of other medical systems such as Ayurveda and Yoga from neighbouring countries, we can train qualified tutors of Traditional Alternative Medicine (TAM). We may expect that this will not only provide traditional medicine facilities to the locals but also to the tourists.

Maldives is a well known and booming tourist destination of the world. Maldives have more than 100 small islands developed as Tourist resorts. Some of these resorts have spas with facilities for traditional medicine and they are usually run by the resort management or even travel agents. Based on an Indian research, 68 % of ageing tourists come to get TAM treatment during holidays.

Interestingly, some areas of our traditional medicine are still popular and continue to be sought after. Most of our traditional alternative medical practitioners are very old. We should not let their age old wisdom perish from our country and it should be transferred to the younger generations as early as possible. TAM has remained our legacy from time immemorial but we may lose it once and for all if we don’t take up this responsibility as an urgent action. Hence the Government is duty bound and committed to train the younger generations.

The mandate of the Ministry of Health extends promotion of Traditional Alternative Medicine. For the development and spreading of the skills and knowledge of traditional medicine, it is absolutely essential to propose the establishment of a traditional alternative medicine services department under the Ministry of Health.
The Maldivian Traditional Medicine is called “Dhivehibeys”. It had been in vogue from time immemorial and also well accepted by the public and the Government. Prior to the 1950's Maldives had no modern medical services at all. Till then and during many years to follow, “Dhivehibeys” played an enormous and important role in the health care delivery of our country.

The old masters of “Dhivehibeys” were experts at making observations regarding the health of an individual and also the probable diseases by feeling one’s radial pulse. They were able to treat diseases by using pharmaceutical preparations from the indigenously available plant parts. Though the origin of Maldivian Traditional Medicine “Dhivehibeys” is lost in the dark recesses of history, the TAM system had existed throughout the 800 years of our known history.

Ancient “Dhivehibeys” depended on locally available ingredients, mostly fresh herbs. In “Dhivehibeys” five main parts of plants are used namely roots, trunk, leaves, flowers and fruits which the traditional medicine practitioners called “Fassangu”. Mostly they use “Fassangu” in “Ruggalubeys”, which is that part of traditional medicine which deals with injuries to the bone. “Ruggalubeys” continued to be popular long after the usage of other branches of Maldivian TAM declined. “Ruggalubeys”, is a well known, curing and an interesting branch of “Dhivehibeys”.

During the late 20th century, old masters consolidated their wisdom and published several books on “Dhivehibeys”. Two of these books were accredited by an Indian practitioner during 2000 – 2006.

2. National Policy on Traditional Alternative Medicine

Traditional Alternative Medicine policy in the Maldives, is directly and indirectly included in the National Development Plan. The absence of a sound Traditional Alternative Medicine sector is considered a serious problem and efforts are made to address the multi
dimensional aspects of the issue. Existing Policy Statement aims only at providing a clear focus for action by setting Traditional Medicine rules and regulations. A New National Traditional Medicine Policy needs to be formulated and implemented. To carry out such essential work, we need to establish a separate department for TAM under the Ministry of Health. Indeed this will need financial and technical assistance, from the government and also the outside agencies.

Efforts are also made to improve access to Maldivian Traditional Medicine for the healthy as well as the unwell whether rich or poor.

3 - The status of legislations

Registration of Traditional Alternative Medicine practitioners is done by the Ministry of Health. According to the results of a survey conducted in 2001, the average age of a practitioner in Traditional Medicine is 55 years. The theoretical and practical wisdom in Traditional Medicine is usually confined to certain families and is transferred through generations. Presently individuals who have an aptitude in Traditional Medicine are directed to work under the guidance and supervision of a registered practitioner for a period of eight weeks and then obtain permission from the Ministry of Health / Advisory committee for Traditional Alternative Medicine to practice individually. The Ministry of Health conducts an appraisal of the practitioner before granting permission to the applicant.

Rights and privileges of Traditional Alternative Medicine practitioners, Registration, quality assurance of Pharmacopoeia and Traditional Medicine Formulary should be formalized with in the rules and regulations and it can be adopted with the assistance of experts in the field. A list of essential Traditional Medicines and pharmacopoeia can be prepared after discussion with contemporary practitioners and conducting some basic research in the field. This process should be facilitated and guided by the TAM department, when it is established.
4. Availability of TAM Medicines in the Country

Production, storage, distribution, imports & exports, of raw materials and finished products in Traditional Alternative Medicine is carried out in a very small scale by the private sector. There is no suitable land for cultivation of herbs in Male’. A private businessman who is interested in the subject has suggested making available a separate island for the purposes of cultivation of herbal gardens and storage of the herbs from which the herbs may be supplied to the practitioners.

5. Development & Research

Ministry of Health has formulated TAM advisory committee for the development of Traditional Alternative Medicine during the last decade. This committee has members from relevant departments and experienced Maldivian TM practitioners. This committee is presently not functioning as desired due to various reasons. It is in need of a lot of financial and technical assistance for its proper functioning.

An in depth evaluation of two books authored by ancient masters of Maldivian Traditional Medicine was done on 2000 and 2006 by Ms Saeeda Mohamed. These two books are:

1 - “Ekuveringe hadhiyaa vakibeyhurge faidhaa” authored by His Excellency Mohamed Ameen Didi, and

2 - “Dhivehi beysveri kamah aiygaaiy kohdhinun” authored by Mr. Malim Manippulhu Muhamed Didi

It was found out that the information on the objectives, materials and contents given in these Two TAM books were correct and is used even in the present day practice of TAM with proper caution. She further clarified the validity and accuracy of the information through experts who conduct research and practice Traditional Alternative Medicine in India. With results of this research, Saeeda prepared a new book with illustrative photos of objects and materials used in Traditional Medicine, in the name of "Dhivehibeys verikamuge Hazaanaage Therein Ehee 01" (From the treasures of Maldivian
traditional medicine – Guide 01). The book also contains biological information of a few plants used in TAM and simple herbal home remedies for common ailments. This book emphasizes on the utility of herbal wealth. She intends to publish this book with authorization of Ministry of Health. It is scheduled to be published in September 2007. Such publications will enhance public awareness of TAM. Ministry of Health has identified the necessity of developing the area of TAM, and hope more books of this nature will be published in the near future. It will help and maintain a healthy lifestyle in our community, as well as help to sustain and promote our major revenue earner, the tourism industry.

Saeeda Mohamed has also completed a nine months TAM course from one of the well known Indian Traditional Alternative Medicine Hospitals, the SNA Hospital Thrissur, India. This hospital is a teaching hospital with the capacity for admission. It also has a pharmacy which prepares Traditional Alternative Medicines.

Thirteen Maldivian students were also sent to this hospital for studying TAM. Funds were available for their training, for only one month. It was made available from a Baa Atoll development project called “Global significant for Atoll conservation” and was organized through Volunteers for Environment Social Harmony and Improvement, (VESHI). For the benefit of the students, the beauty therapy part of the Syllabus was taught during their one month training. After completion they were awarded a Certificate of Spa therapist by the SNA Hospital in 2006. According to the complete syllabus, they have to undergo 2 months training in the Maldives on “Dhivehibeys”, and 6 months training with biological knowledge of ingredients in SNA hospital Thurissur, India. For the remaining part of this course, VESHI is working hard to acquire funds even though it is not very easy to obtain such kind of funds by a non profit non governmental volunteers’ organization. The syllabus includes Ayurveda, community medicine, special therapeutic procedures, acupuncture, Panchakarma, Yoga and “Dhivehibeys”. Still those 13 students are waiting for funds.
6 – Present Status in short

There has been a global upsurge in the use of Herbal/ Traditional/ Complementary/ Alternative Medicine, both developed and developing countries, in the last decade. Maldives need to take action for the development of TAM, before the age old tradition disappears from our culture completely. In order to do this, a number of tasks need to be done. They are;

a - Policy and guidelines of TAM need to be developed urgently

b- Rules and regulations related to TAM need to be developed and formalized.

c- Appoint technical staff for the establishment of a department for the development of TAM.

d- Information on pharmacopeia urgently needs to be compiled and made available.

e- Much technical and financial support is needed for activation of existing TAM Advisory Committee.

f- Disseminate information on TAM especially for scantily populated island communities.

g- Training of the TAM practitioners for the tourism industry to be considered. Tourism is the major source of revenue of the country, (60 % of GDP)

h- A lot of tourists repeatedly come to get TAM treatment in the resort spas. We need to employ Maldivian qualified practitioners of TAM in the resorts.

i- Tourists who are old travel to get TAM treatment during the holidays.( About 68%, based on an Indian research ).

j- Our TAM practitioners are elderly, the average age being 55 years. We need to train the younger generation. (Based on 2001 survey report)
7 - Recommendations

Urgent needs for consideration for the development of Traditional Alternative Medicine in the Maldives.

1 - Policy need to be developed. Have to organize regional workshop on policy, which will help to arrive at a consensus on National Policy after due deliberations and discussions.

2 - Appropriate funds and technical expertise are needed, for compilation of information on pharmacopeia and other available relevant materials.

3 - Establish a separate Department with Research Unit for conducting research on TAM. This research unit can function with a little effort if we have qualified technical staff. The unit can work together with Food and Drug Laboratory under the Ministry of Health for the time being.

4 - Six weeks study tour for the members who are interested, and actively participating in TAM, to the countries which already possess separate departments of TAM under their respective Governments.

5 - Training for the younger generation, especially for those who have completed one month basic training in India, as we do not presently have facilities to acquire botanical, experimental and biological knowledge in the Maldives.

6 - Financial and technical support are needed for Two months practical training in the Maldives on Dhivehibeys, for the students who has completed one month training in India.

7 - To support local training in FHS, need to provide qualified tutor for at least one or two years. Shortage of tutors, is adversely affecting continuing of TAM course.

8 - Sufficient funds for printing of 10,000 copies of Text book (which has 120 to 130 pages), in quality color print with illustrative photos of objects, plants and various
treatment methods and materials used which readers can easily understand by going through them.

9 - **Technical and financial assistance** are needed to open a digital library with existing pharmacopeia and other TAM related information where every one can access.

10 - **Qualified hands and sufficient funds are required** to translate and publish Policy on TAM and other relevant books and publications.

11 - **Have to amass technical expertise** from those who are working or had worked in the field for consultation and guidance. It is suggested that the services of a hand not below the rank of Professor/Reader may be needed. WHO can observe the work and offer guidance through a consultant periodically.

8 - **Conclusion**

While the status of TAM in the country is very critical, we are prepared to do the needful work for the development, publication and propagation of this subject in Maldives with the guidance of experts and consultants within or outside the country, considering the emergent nature and magnitude of the responsibility assigned to us.

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