Natural therapies, a viable healthcare option

01/11/2018

Cuba's medical protocols for different ailments suggest the complementary use of therapies based on natural and traditional medicine, since patients respond well with the integration of this treatment, according to the country's experts.

"Natural and traditional medicine is not the solution to poverty, but it is an option of wealth," Raúl Castro Ruz.

The combination of natural and traditional methods with conventional treatment recommended by Cuban doctors has generated a body of knowledge that supports precise medical attention and serves to extend academic training.

Natural and traditional medicine is understood as a broad profile clinical specialty with a unique, holistic scientific focus, using techniques and procedures to promote health, prevent disease, make diagnosis, treat and rehabilitate with a medical approach based on ancestral practices and non-Western cultures.

Its principal goal is establishing a balance or correcting imbalances in human beings, based on medical thinking that considers the person as a unique whole, taking into account the individual, not just the illness. It includes awareness of the interdependence of human beings and the environment, and the impact on health

of lifestyles.

This discipline bases selection of therapies on individual criteria that have as a foundation specific concepts related to health and its affectations, which generate effective, safe, and efficient treatments, since they address intrinsic causes of ailments.

This approach is used in Cuba at the primary care level and in hospitals, based on a systematic, nationwide state plan of action. The program includes ensuring the production, distribution, and sales of natural products; guaranteed medical attention; training of personnel; ongoing research and the generalization of findings; health promotion and education; in addition to supervision and evaluation of measures adopted.

All of this is captured in the Economic and Social Policy Guidelines, approved by Congresses of the Communist Party of Cuba, and framed within the context of transformations underway in Cuban society. Guideline no. 158 from the Sixth Congress reads: Afford maximum attention to the development of Natural and Traditional Medicine; and no. 132 from the Seventh calls for ensuring the implementation of action plans to guarantee the development and consolidation of Natural and Traditional Medicine.

Dr. Silvia González Rodríguez, secretary of the Cuban Society of Natural and Traditional Medicine, and specialist Dr. Gilsa Asunción Cabrera Leal, believe that this approach offers patients another medical option. **Photo:** Nuria Barbosa

Dr. Silvia González Rodríguez, secretary of the Cuban Society of Natural and Traditional Medicine and president of the advisory committee working with Havana's University of Medical Sciences, explained to **Granma International** that the field includes traditional Chinese methods, as well as therapeutic procedures practiced by the island's original peoples and from the long legacy of folk medicine in Cuba.

"The fundamental push for its introduction in Cuba was determined by the shortage of medications in the 1990s, caused by the economic crisis that we know as the Special Period. Today we have consolidated work carried out over 25 years. Our medical protocols for different ailments suggest the use of therapies based on natural and traditional medicine, since with the integration of this treatment, a better evolution for patients is achieved," explained Dr. González.

SOME HISTORY

The first course in acupuncture for doctors was offered in Cuba in 1962. In 1973, the "Dr. Juan Tomás Roig" medicinal plants station was established, and in 1975, the first surgery with acupuncture anesthesia was performed at Comandante Manuel Fajardo Hospital.

In 1988, the Central Pharmaceutical Laboratory attached to Havana's University of Medical Sciences was founded, and in the 1990s several ministerial resolutions were approved to extend the use of these practices throughout the country. The Cuban Society of Bio-energetic and Natural Medicine was founded in 1996.

The first academic programs for Masters in Natural and Traditional Medicine were initiated in this decade, while in 1998 the first edition of Cuba's **Journal** of **Medicinal Plants** was published. With the turn of the century, the subject was introduced in medical school study plans, and advanced studies became available

in all provinces. More than 35% of community family doctor's offices now have the necessary supplies to practice acupuncture and related techniques.

Among Natural and Traditional Medicine treatments offered in Cuba. **Photo:** Jose M. Correa

“In the courses to train specialists, we teach a series of techniques and procedures approved by our national public health system – ten at this time. In this, we integrate modern medical thinking with elements of natural, traditional medicine,” Dr. González reported.

Every year, a convocation is issued to encourage the training of specialists, and many Comprehensive General Medicine doctors, as well as others who wish to pursue a second specialty, enroll in the three-year course that includes all modalities of natural and traditional treatment recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO), according to expert Dr. Gilsa Asunción Cabrera Leal.

“In the health technology department, there are eight major areas of study, and plans are under consideration to offer a class on natural and traditional medicine. Medical school programs have conceived a rotation in this specialty, and all teach the basic principles of the specialty with emphasis on acupressure, acupuncture, and other techniques,” explained the doctor, also a health administration specialist.

She added that eight short courses have been offered nationally for doctors in other specialties, prior to which a methodological workshop was held for those who would be delivering classes, to ensure consistency and update the bibliography to be used. Audio-conferences and other digital media were used to

make the information available to more professionals.

Havana was recently the site of the Cuban Society of Natural and Traditional Medicine's Sixth Congress, BIONAT 2018 (September 4-7), where a broad exchange of experiences took place. Of special note was the Indigenous and Afro-descendent Traditional Medicine Symposium, sponsored by the Pan American Health Organization.

Also held in this context were the Second Cuba-Japan Integrative Medicine Symposium; debates on issues like ozone therapy; complementary traditional medicine at the primary care level; and training of professionals.

The Cuban Society had a stand featuring expositions from the Traditional, Complementary, Integrative Medicine Network of the Americas, and held a natural nutritionist session, as well.

Dr. Cabrera Leal participated in a panel discussion on homeopathy, presenting the experience she gained in offering the eight programs in several provinces, commenting, "We additionally offered an open class on the use of natural and traditional medicine in the event of disasters, and presented the work of our Health Technology faculty in building ties with the community."

PATIENTS EXPRESS THEIR OPINIONS

The doctor invited **Granma International** to visit her office, where we met several patients who have benefited from this approach. A seven-year-old girl, Lía de Jesús Pérez y Borge, was there seeking treatment for frequent intestinal Giardia infections.

Her mother, Odette, reported that she first came to the clinic about a year ago, on the suggestion of friends whose children had been treated here for attention deficit. The doctor provided self-help exercises and floral therapy.

Likewise, Dilsia Rosa Verdecia, 45 years of age, has been receiving help with her allergies for a number of years. She had been prescribed antihistamines, but complementing these with homeopathy, she said, has been more effective. Niurka Herrera Sabarría was visiting for the first time, referred by her orthopedic doctor, seeking help with pain in her legs.

All agreed in pointing out that this type of treatment helps heal the body, reinforce the immune system, strengthen doctor-patient relations, reduce the use of chemical medications, and has fewer side effects and risks than other treatments.