

INTEGRATING TRADITIONAL AND COMPLEMENTARY MEDICINE IN HEALTHCARE SYSTEMS: A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

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Each society maintains systems to support well-being, shaped by cultural views on health and illness, including alternative, traditional, and allopathic medical practices¹. Health-seeking behavior and the choice between allopathic and traditional healing are influenced by factors including disease severity, beliefs in supernatural causes, and preventive concerns².

Globally, traditional and complementary medicine (T&CM) plays a vibrant role in healthcare, whether as a primary or supplementary service. Its use is growing all over, though often underestimated. Traditional medicine (TM) is a long-standing practice based on cultural knowledge, skills, and beliefs, used for maintaining health and treating physical and mental illnesses. Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) includes practices outside conventional care, while T&CM combines CAM and TM, encompassing related products, practices, and providers³. Traditional, indigenous, and ancestral knowledge has sustained health for millennia and is still crucial in many parts of the world. World Health Organization (WHO) mentions that 170 of 194 member states use practices like herbal medicine, acupuncture, yoga, and indigenous therapies⁴. WHO's 13th General Program of Work (2019-2023) aims to advance Sustainable Development Goal 3 by reaching 3 billion more people through universal health coverage, better emergency response, and healthier populations. T&CM can support this goal by becoming part of essential health services, expanding access to safe, effective, and culturally appropriate care to meet community needs and strengthen primary healthcare systems⁵.

The progress of T&CM across WHO regions highlights notable advancements, ongoing challenges, and opportunities for global improvement. As of 2018, T&CM progress was visible across all 6 WHO regions. The African region showed strong advancements in policies and programs, though herbal medicine regulation remained a challenge. In the Americas, there was growth in national frameworks, slightly trailing global averages, but with increasing recognition of T&CM. The Eastern Mediterranean region made notable progress in regulating herbal medicines, with several countries implementing supportive laws and policies. The European region reported high rates of herbal medicine regulation but lagged in policies, programs, and research. The South-East Asia region surpassed global averages across all indicators, with robust policy and regulatory systems. Meanwhile, the Western Pacific region had a strong policy focus, although herbal medicine regulation still fell behind global standards⁴.

Traditional medicine is gaining global recognition through collaborative efforts, innovation, and policies that ensure equity, and sustainability. With assistance from India, WHO founded the Global Traditional Medicine Centre (GTMC) in 2022 to address demand across the world. Based in Jamnagar, GTMC serves as a knowledge hub, promoting research, innovation, and sustainability in traditional medicine while respecting local heritage and supporting global health and development goals⁶. Strategic initiatives include the upcoming launch of the draft Global Strategy for Traditional Medicine (2025–2034) and the 2nd WHO Traditional Medicine Global Summit in December 2025, New Delhi. Led by the WHO GTMC, these efforts aim to strengthen evidence, bridge ancient traditions with modern innovation, and promote equity, biodiversity protection, and the rights of ethnic people in global health⁷. In the G20 Health

Working Group meetings in Brazil in June 2024, Brazil, India, South Africa, China, Indonesia, the United States, WHO, Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), and World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) hosted a high-level forum on traditional medicine, showcasing significant progress in integrating T&CM into healthcare systems to advance universal health coverage and the Sustainable Development Goals. India endeavor its Ayurveda, Yoga, Unani, Siddha, Homeopathy (AYUSH) strategy and Traditional Knowledge Digital Library, while South Africa emphasized its regulatory frameworks for traditional healers. Brazil stressed its leadership in keeping TM on the global agenda. The WIPO convention on proprietary rights, genetic assets, and the conventional knowledge manifest an innovative, ensuring fair recognition and benefit-sharing for ethnic people and local communities whose contributions are essential to global health and biodiversity preservation⁸.

In Bangladesh, traditional healing practices include folk medicine, cultural rituals, and systems like Ayurveda and Unani, which combine scientific methods and pharmaceutical technology. Due to limited access to modern healthcare, around 75-80% of the rural population retain stagnant beliefs on TM, with traditional practitioners providing services rooted in long-standing beliefs and effective outcomes. In order to achieve general well-being, these activities adopt a holistic approach, taking all aspects of one's physical health, and society. Although Ayurveda and Unani are formally recognized, challenges such as safety, effectiveness, quality, and regulation of TM persist, with traditional healers often operating outside formal healthcare structures, which can have serious enormities for public health⁹. Despite the expansion of modern healthcare, T&CM remains vital in both rural and urban areas. This balanced approach has the potential to narrow the divide between traditional and modern medical treatments. In addition, some countries have already adopted this approach, integrating both healthcare services is recommended. However, it seems that more health policies and the formation of a regulatory structure for treatment-related issues are required to foster trust in traditional medicine among health practitioners, encouraging collaboration and integration.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest.

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