

The Use of Herbal Remedies and the Perception of these Practices in the Barbadian Population

By: Annie Lallement and Sariné Willis-O'Connor
Mentored by: Dr. Damian Cohall, Dr. Thea Scantlebury-Manning, Dr. Danielle Donnelly, and Dr. Stan Kubow

Introduction

Although research has been conducted on the history of the use of herbal remedies in Barbados, there has not been enough research done on its modern usages. The University of the West Indies has formed an Ethnopharmacology Research Group (ERG). This Group is involved in a two-part study that looks at the biochemical interactions between herbal remedies and conventional medications, and the sociological reasons why Barbadians continue to use these herbal remedies. A collaborative activity between McGill University students and mentors at the ERG explored this subject by examining factors that influence why Barbadians today might use herbs as opposed to conventional medicines, and whether these factors influence the combined usage of herbs and conventional medications. These factors include: the influence of the physician, socio-economic status, whether the patient is aware of possible interactions between conventional and traditional medicines, and whether others in the patient's family use them.

Past Research

Herbal remedies were first introduced to the island when the Europeans brought slaves from Africa (Bayley, 1949). The African slaves had limited access to medications, and so they relied on the plants that surrounded them as a source of medication.

Methods of preparing these herbal remedies were passed down through the

generations, and many are still used today. It is hypothesized that ancestral influences may be a reason why Barbadians continue to use herbal preparations.

With increased education and more research into pharmaceuticals, Barbadians have questioned the effectiveness of herbal remedies (Howell et al., 2006). Problems arise when Barbadians continue to use familiar herbs at the same time as they are taking prescribed medications, as this can lead to negative interactions.

Hypotheses

The ERG questioned whether Barbadians use herbal remedies with conventional medications, and whether they are aware of the possible negative interactions that may ensue. The ERG was also interested in whether Barbadians have a good relationship with their physician. They suspected that if Barbadians spoke openly with their doctors about their usage of herbal remedies, they would be less likely to use them in tandem with conventional medications.

Methodology

To examine these hypotheses, McGill University students assisted the ERG with the development of a questionnaire to distribute to Barbadians. Since there are Anglican churches in each of the eleven parishes in Barbados, the Anglican Church was chosen as the distribution mechanism. Over a 6-week interval, the two McGill students and one of their UWI supervisors attended two Sunday church services. With the assistance of the reverend at each service, a six-page questionnaire was distributed to the members of the congregation to fill out.



Participant of the survey

Results

A total of 375 questionnaires were collected with most of the participants being females, between the ages of 51 and 60, and having secondary school as their highest level of education. Parental usage of herbs and having health insurance resulted in a strong relationship with the participant's use of herbs. Half (44.3%) of the participants that used herbs responded that they use herbs with prescribed drugs, and the other half (55.7%) said otherwise. Moreover, half (56.5%) of the participants answered that they are unaware of any possible drug-herb interactions, while the other half (43.5%) responded that are aware. No significant correlation was found between the education of the participant and the use of herbs, and the income of the participant and the use of herbs. This demonstrates that herbal usage is not constrained to a certain social class, but is used by both the educated and the least educated Barbadians.



St. George Parish Church, St. George. Barbados
(Source: Annie Lallement)

Conclusion

It can be concluded that there is an ancestral influence on the use of herbal remedies, and that a Barbadian's socio-economic level is unrelated to the use of alternative medicines. There is also a disparity in knowledge about whether herb-drug interactions exist. Education on the subject of herbal consumption needs to take the Barbadian history and culture into account, and the medical community needs to be aware that a number of Barbadians are unaware of potential drug/herb interactions.

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Participants

Annie Lallement is in her final year of her Social Work Undergraduate degree and Sariné Willis-O'Connor is in her third year of her Psychology Undergraduate degree at McGill University, Canada. They are both participants of the new Barbados Interdisciplinary Tropical Studies program, which began this summer, (2009). This is a collaborative activity between McGill University and the University of the West Indies.



Left to right: Sariné Willis-O'Connor, Dr.Thea Scantlebury-Manning and Annie Lallement.

Back: Dr.Damian Cohall
(Source: Annie Lallement)

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