

Herb: cure or con?

MADAGASCAR: SA ASKED TO EVALUATE EFFICACY OF CLAIMED COVID-19 CURE

» Medical experts divided on benefits of popular medicinal plant.

Eric Naki

South African medical experts are keeping an open mind on potential treatments for Covid-19 but are cautious about jumping on any miracle cure bandwagons just yet, despite helping to test one of these offerings from Madagascar.

South Africa has offered to evaluate the efficacy of the herb locally known as *umhlonyane*, as pressure mounts for the government to try the herb in the fight against coronavirus in the absence of a vaccine.

The medicinal plant, also known as *Artemisia afra* or African wormwood, has traditionally been used to treat a host of illnesses such as fever, cough, stomach ache, abdominal pains, toothache and earache, and to dress wounds, sores, and to clear the respiratory system, among others. It's believed to be effective on its own but is often mixed with other herbs.

Rural communities had passed the indigenous knowledge on the plant from generation to generation. Urban households planted it as part of garden decoration.

Many scholars have done extensive research on it but both apartheid and black democratic authorities refused to entertain calls to have the drug tested for use.

But now, with Madagascar busy testing the drug and rolling it out in the form of a drink as a potential cure for Covid-19, South African health authorities have expressed interest in testing it.

The Madagascar experiment raised international curiosity since no cure has yet been found for Covid-19.

The Africa Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) took a keen interest in the Madagascan plan. During a briefing yesterday, Africa CDC director Dr John Nkengasong said: "We are in consultation with Madagascar about their herbal remedy."

Nkengasong said they had invited Madagascan scientists to join efforts by the Africa Task Force on Coronavirus Response in finding ways to fight Covid-19.

"It is a fact that the local remedy over the years has proven to be valuable. Anyone who has a product of that nature we can work together with. But we cannot announce any remedy that has not been tested scientifically. It is important that we look at the safety and efficacy of such remedies," Nkengasong said.

Stellenbosch University-based Dr Thozamile Qubuda, who has extensive knowledge of African traditional medicine and healing practices, acknowledged the me-

dicinal value of *Atermisia afra*, particularly in killing stomach parasites.

But he said there was no history of the herb's ability to kill a bacteria or viruses like Covid-19.

He said the traditional practice of *ukufutha*, which involved steaming the naked human body with a boiled portion of a herb like *umhlonyane* under a blanket so as to induce sweating, could be effective in treating the disease.

Qubuda doubted the Madagascan approach though, because it was never tested scientifically for its efficacy to cure coronavirus.

"The Madagascan remedy is inferior because you cannot rely on observational evidence.

"There has to be scientific tests done to prove that their method does cure this virus," he said.

Professor Salim Abdool Karim, a lead advisor to Health Minister Zweli Mkhize on Covid-19, said he had been inundated with calls for the country to try the herb.

Karim, a renowned epidemiologist and infectious diseases specialist, said they were prepared to test the herb.

Mkhize said Madagascar's health ministry had been in touch with his office on the matter and South Africa was willing to assist with scientific research.

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WHO issues warning

The World Health Organisation (WHO) yesterday advised governments to clinically test a herbal drink touted by Madagascar's President Andry Rajoelina as a remedy against coronavirus.

The Covid-Organics infusion is derived from artemisia - a plant with proven anti-malarial properties - and other indigenous herbs.

Rajoelina hopes to distribute the infusion across West Africa and beyond, claiming it cures Covid-19 patients within 10 days.

Equatorial Guinea, Guinea-Bissau and Niger have already received consignments of the potion. Others such as Tanzania have expressed interest.

But the WHO has repeatedly warned that there are no published scientific studies of the herbal tea and that its effects have not been tested.

"We would caution and advise countries against adopting a product that has not been taken through tests to see its efficacy," WHO Africa Direc-

tor Matshidiso Moeti said in a press briefing yesterday, calling on Madagascar to take the drink "through a clinical trial".

Moeti said that in 2000, African governments had committed to taking "traditional therapies" through the same clinical trials as other medication.

"I can understand the need, the drive to find something that can help," Moeti said. "But we would like to encourage this scientific process in which the governments themselves made a commitment."

However, eSwatini said it would not consider Rajoelina's tonic for the time being.

"It is important as a country to first ascertain where such herbal products have been tested," said Health Minister Lizzie Nkosi. "We have to do proper research and be sure that the product works."

The Economic Community of West African States has debunked claims that it had ordered a package of Covid-Organics from a "third country". - AFP

info

- ▶ Traditional Healers Organisation coordinator Phephsile Maseko criticised government for overlooking the prowess of African medicine in favour of Western medicine.
- ▶ "It is sad that we need to teach our government what to do when the country is infected by a disease like Covid-19. We need to be careful not to find ourselves in

- a predicament where we have to choose who we are and what we want to become," Maseko said.
- ▶ She said it was not surprising that *umhlonyane* showed as a potential to cure for Covid-19 because African healing methods historically provided solutions during the outbreak of pandemics.
- ▶ "Let's use this plant to protect ourselves against any evil includ-

- ing this virus," she said.
- ▶ In the 1800s, an African herb was used to treat a bilharzia pandemic and an indigenous plant, *umhluzane*, or *Lippia Javanca*, from South Africa provided the solution for the treatment of malaria in Africa.
- ▶ Many mosquito repellants are made from herbs, such as citronella.