Coronavirus Disease 2019 and Herbal Therapy: Pertinent Issues Relating to Toxicity and Standardization of Phytopharmaceuticals

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Received: 2 December 2020 / Accepted: 19 January 2021 / Published online: 11 March 2021
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Abstract
Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a virulent viral disease that has now become a public health emergency of global significance and still without an approved treatment regimen or cure. In the absence of curative drugs and with vaccines development still in progress, alternative approaches to stem the tide of the pandemic are being considered. The potential of a phytotherapeutic approach in the management of the dreaded disease has gained attention, especially in developing countries, with several claims of the development of anti-COVID-19 herbal formulations. This is a plausible approach especially with the increasing acceptance of herbal medicine in both alternative and orthodox medical practices worldwide. Also, the established efficacy of herbal remedies in the treatment of numerous viral diseases including those caused by coronaviruses, as well as diseases with symptoms associated with COVID-19, presents a valid case for serious consideration of herbal medicine in the treatment of COVID-19. However, there are legitimate concerns and daunting challenges with the use of herbs and herbal products. These include issues of quality control, unethical production practice, inadequate information on the composition, use and mechanisms, weak regulatory policies, herb-drug interactions and adverse reactions, and the tendency for abuse. This review discusses the feasibility of intervention with herbal medicine in the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to take proactive measures to protect public health by improving the quality and safety of herbal medicine deployed to combat the disease.

Keywords Herbal medicine · Traditional medicine · Herb-drug interaction · Standardization · Drug control · Phytochemicals

Introduction
Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a virulent viral disease that was first reported in Wuhan, a city in the Hubei province of China where it was believed to have originated in December 2019. The virus causing the disease which mainly targets the human respiratory system was named severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) by the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses in February 2020 (Xie et al. 2020). COVID-19 is now a public health emergency of global significance, and as of 30th June 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO), which has since upgraded its threat status to the “highest” level, reported over 10 million confirmed global cases with 503,862 deaths and an overall mortality rate of 4.8%. A large chunk of the confirmed cases and deaths were recorded in the Americas (5,136,705 cases and 247,129 deaths) and Europe (2,692,086 cases and 197,254 deaths). Unfortunately, the continent of Africa which had previously recorded far fewer incidences and deaths has now witnessed an alarming surge in the total number of cases (297,290) and deaths (6010) (WHO 2020 June 30). An underestimation of infections and deaths, especially in Africa countries, is almost certainly due to the limitations of testing and monitoring.

“Coronaviruses,” from the Latin word “corona” or crown to depict their crown-like morphology when viewed under an electron microscope, are enveloped positive sense, single-stranded RNA viruses belonging to the family of coronaviridae and with diameter sizes ranging between 60 and 140 nm (Singhal 2020; Stanley et al. 2020). The Coronavirinae, being a sub-family of the
chlorine like those present in frequently recommended hand sanitizers (Zumla et al. 2016; Stanley et al. 2020; Zhou et al. 2020). In terms of the survival of SARS-CoV-2 on different surfaces, the virus is capable of being viable up to 3 h in the air post aerosolization, up to 24 h on paper and clothing, and up to 2–3 days on plastic and stainless steel (ECDPC 2020). Coronavirus orchestrates deleterious inflammatory changes mainly in the respiratory system as well as in the enteric and central nervous systems of animals and humans (Fehr and Perlman 2015; Stanley et al. 2020). Apart from the lung which is the major target organ of COVID-19, the disease also affects and damages the kidneys, heart, genitals, and liver (Ma et al. 2020; Xie et al. 2020). The hallmarks of COVID-19 that make it more dangerous and dicey than previous forms of coronavirus diseases, i.e., MERS and SARS, are related to its long incubation period and the relatively low pathogenicity (Lippi and Plebani 2020). These two factors contribute immensely to the sustained incidences and the amplification of the disease outbreak in China and all over the world.

COVID-19 has come with a huge economic toll and social burden having forced almost all the countries of the world at one point or the other to partial or total lockdown ranging from weeks to months. The disease also poses a great challenge to medical personnel saddled with the responsibility of managing COVID-19 patients since it requires immense expertise, self-control, and commitment to assuage the risk of infection as well as the constant need for increased manpower and materials. The deleterious effects of the pandemic on economic, social, and medical statuses of countries in the world will surely remain with mankind for a while.

Discussion

Epidemiology

COVID-19 can affect anyone irrespective of age. Children, however, are relatively less susceptible to COVID-19 infections and are also likely to present with milder symptoms than adults when infected (Zimmermann and Curtis 2020). Even though a few cases of the severe symptoms of the disease have been reported, the predominant clinical condition in children is febrile upper respiratory tract disease and the course of the disease is usually milder and shorter. Also, in pregnant women, the clinical manifestations are mostly mild although few incidences of severe disease and fatal outcomes have been registered (Zaigham and Andersson 2020). Underlying health conditions that predispose to negative prognosis include chronic respiratory disease, diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, obesity, and compromised immune system (Petrilli et al. 2020; Singhal 2020). People with these underlying health conditions and the elderly ones with reduced immunity are more likely to be at higher risk for severe COVID-19 illness (Singhal 2020). Data obtained from the study of
4203 mostly Asian patients underpinned hypertension, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes as the most common comorbidities (ECDPC 2020; Zhang and Liu 2020).

Pathology and Pathogenesis

Covid-19 is a disease of the lung and the histological architecture of a diseased patient presents diffuse alveolar damage like other respiratory illnesses caused by viruses like SARS-CoV and MERS-CoV. However, SARS-CoV-2 infection could be distinguished by the presence of endothelial injury of wide severity, blood clot or thrombosis, microangiopathy, and angiogenesis. The pathogenesis of COVID-19 is believed to involve the invasion of the alveolar epithelial cells by the SARS-CoV-2 virus via binding to the angiotensin-converting enzyme-2 (ACE2) receptor through the coronavirus spike (S) protein. The invasion of the epithelial cells is thought to promote direct toxicity and exacerbate immune response which could lead to massive cytokines activation and mobilization capable of inflicting lung injury that could lead to respiratory failure and death in severe cases (Chang et al. 2006; Jiang et al. 2020; Ren et al. 2020; Xie et al. 2020). SARS-CoV-2 could invade other organs with the presence of ACE2 including the heart, kidney, and intestines causing lethal damages and a pathological condition called multiple organ dysfunction syndrome (MODS) (Xie et al. 2020). Levels of inflammatory mediators and cytokines including the interleukins (IL-6, IL-7, IL-10), interferon gamma-induced protein 10, monocyte chemoattractant protein-1, macrophage inflammatory protein 1a, and tumor necrosis factor-α (TNF-α) are known to be elevated in severe COVID-19 cases and the excessive activation of these factors might be linked with poor prognosis as it could be an indication of the progression from the mild form to the severe form of the disease (Gong et al. 2020; Singhal 2020; Xie et al. 2020). Another potentially useful indicator of severity and prognosis is the viral load which could be 60 times higher in severe patients compared with mild cases (ECDPC 2020; Liu et al. 2020).

Symptoms and Clinical Presentation

The clinical presentations of COVID-19 are known to be varied as they range from an asymptomatic state to acute respiratory distress syndrome and multi-organ dysfunction (Singhal 2020). Observational study and documentation across various health facilities have indicated that the most common symptoms of COVID-19, in mild or moderate cases, are also common to other respiratory infections. These include, in the order of frequency, headache, anosmia, nasal airway obstruction, cough, fatigue, muscular pain or myalgia, rhinorrhea or runny nose, loss of taste, sore throat, fever (ECDPC 2020; Lechien et al. 2020) and gastrointestinal symptoms like abdominal pain, vomiting, and diarrhea in some cases (Docherty et al. 2020; ECDPC 2020). The disease could progress in some patients, after a week, to more severe forms like pneumonia and respiratory failure which is the major causative agent of fatality in severe COVID-19 cases (Xie et al. 2020; Zhang et al. 2020).

Transmission

SARS-CoV-2 is contained in fluids and droplets in cough or sneeze of infected persons and the disease could be contracted when in contact with infected droplets in the air or when contaminated surfaces are touched. The RNA of the virus could be detected in respiratory tract specimens 24–48 h before clinical symptoms and up to 8 days in mild cases or longer in severe cases. SARS-CoV-2 RNA is also detectable in feces, blood, saliva, urine, tears, and breast milk (ECDPC 2020). The infectivity of the detectable RNA in the substances of human origin remains to be proven. There are cases of asymptomatic individuals that have been confirmed through laboratory testing to have the virus. These individuals could proceed to develop some symptoms at a later stage of infection or remain asymptomatic throughout (Luo et al. 2020). Transmission of the disease from asymptomatic carriers is possible even though the risk of being infected by asymptomatic or even pre-symptomatic patients is considerably higher (ECDPC 2020). Symptomatic patients can be infectious as long as symptoms persist even when undergoing clinical recovery.

Testing for COVID-19

Diagnostic test samples obtained from the upper (nasopharyngeal/oropharyngeal swabs, nasal aspirates, nasal wash, or saliva) or lower (sputum or bronchoalveolar lavage) respiratory tracts have all been used for the detection of SARS-CoV-2. Different types of detection assays could be used for COVID-19 diagnostic testing and screening depending on the expected outcome. These include nucleic acid test to detect the presence of SARS-CoV-2 RNA using RT-PCR techniques, antigen tests to detect the presence of viral antigen, and the antibody test to detect the presence of antibodies generated against the virus using techniques including enzyme-linked immunosorbent assays, chemiluminescence assays, and lateral flow assays. Also, whole genome sequences can be performed to determine the sequence of the virus in a sample to detect variants. Sensitivity for nasopharyngeal swab tests in patients was found to be about 98% compared with 91% for saliva tests (ECDPC 2020; Gorbalenya et al. 2020).

Orthodox Treatment for COVID-19

As of now, there is no specific, clinically approved treatment regimen for COVID-19; hence, all interventions are basically...
Use of Herbs in Disease Management

In the last few decades, the patronage of herbal medicine has surged and now boasts of a huge market having been embraced by many developed countries in Europe and North America under the umbrella of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM). It is now widely believed that CAM has the potential of affording healthier living in the world (Nissen 2010; Ekor 2014). This is unlike in the past when the bias against traditional medicine was strong due to the wide acceptance of allopathic medicine, out-of-context criticism by those with little knowledge of herbal medicine who tend to focus on reported toxicities, institutionally driven media propaganda, and influence of western beliefs.

Approximately 80% of the world population, many of whom live in developing countries, rely on herbal medicine as the primary source of healthcare due to several reasons ranging from ready accessibility, affordability, and cultural acceptance (Bandaranayake 2006; Ekor 2014). The rich repertoire of bioactive phytochemicals in plants makes them very essential to drug discovery and a source of viable alternative medicines. Reports have emerged about people, especially in the developing African and Asian countries, employing herbal medicine to treat COVID-19 (Chinsembu 2020). Recently, the World Health Organization (WHO) and Africa Centre for Disease Control (CDC) constituted a committee to assist and guide African countries on the use of herbal medicine against the novel coronavirus (Forku 2020). The WHO, however, has cautioned against adopting products that have not undergone rigorous clinical trials to ascertain their safety and effectiveness against COVID-19 following its meeting with 70 African traditional medicine experts to discuss the role of traditional medicine during the pandemic (Gikandi 2020).

Antiviral Medicinal Plants

*Moringa oleifera* Lam.

The antiviral property of *Moringa oleifera* Lam., Moringaceae, has been attributed to the flavonoid
kaempferol (Singh et al. 2020). The aqueous extract of the plant inhibited the growth of Newcastle disease virus in chicken eggs (Monera and Maponga 2012; Popoola and Obembe 2013). In mice, the ethanol extract delayed the development of skin lesions and mortality caused by the herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1). Treatment with the leaf powder has also been correlated with improved immunity and ability to fight infections among HIV/AIDS patients in some parts of Africa while also slowing down the antiretroviral drug-induced apoptosis of helper T cells in patients on active antiretroviral therapy (HAART) (Ogbuagu et al. 2016; Singh et al. 2020). According to Ogbuagu et al. (2016), the HIV/AIDS patients received 20 g daily of M. oleifera leaf powder mixed with normal meal for 60 days and the pre- and post-CD4 counts were analyzed. Findings revealed markedly increased post CD4 counts compared with pre-CD4 counts in male (496.1 ± 61.52 cells/mm³ vs 362.7 ± 49.68 cells/mm³) and female patients (547.6 ± 57.9 cells/mm³ vs 459.7 ± 40.65 cells/mm³).

Andrographis paniculata (Burm. f.) Wall.

Dengue, a mosquito-borne viral disease caused by dengue virus (DENV), is assuming an alarming dimension with currently no vaccine or antiviral drugs for its control. Ali-Seyed and Vijayaraghavan (2020) reviewed the antidiengue virus activities of Andrographis paniculata (Burm.f.) Wall, Acanthaceae, a medicinal plant common to tropical Asian countries. Treatment of dengue virus patients with herbal mixtures containing A. paniculata for a week caused considerable symptomatic relief and improvement of the dengue fever (Tang et al. 2012). The plant possesses antimicrobial and anti-inflammatory properties as well as anti-larval activity for the disease-causing mosquito and insects. Bicyclic diterpenoid lactones and diterpenoids components including andrographolide, neandrographolide (NAND), and 14-deoxy-11,12-didehydroandrographolide (I) (DDAND) have been identified as the active phytochemicals responsible for the activities (Ali-Seyed and Vijayaraghavan 2020). According to the report, one of the active phytoconstituents of the plant, 14-deoxy-11,12-didehydroandrographolide, exerts a time-dependent inhibitory action on thrombin-induced platelet aggregation (Thisoda et al. 2006) which is one major mechanism of dengue viral infections. Active constituents in the plant exert antiplatelet effect by modulating platelet-activating factor through various signaling pathways including eNOS-NO/cyclic-GMP PLC-2-PKC and PI3 kinase/Akt-MAPKs (Ali-Seyed and Vijayaraghavan 2020; Lu et al. 2011).

Carica papaya L.

In addition, studies have shown that treatment with papaya leaf extract significantly increased the platelet count and reversed the hallmark thrombocytopenia associated with dengue fever (Dharmarathna et al. 2013; Singh et al. 2020) within 24 h in five patients (Kala 2012). The bleeding in dengue patients is associated with a decreased platelet count accompanied by increased vascular permeability and plasma leakage. Hence, a study conducted to evaluate whether papaya leaf extract could protect blood cells against stress-induced gave a positive result (Ranasinghe et al. 2012). Also, the leaf extract of C. papaya could decrease the production of inflammatory cytokines in the dengue virus-infected AG129 mice (Norahmad et al. 2019), downregulate DENV NS1 envelop protein and stimulate IFN-α expressions in THP-1 cells (Sharma et al. 2019; Singh et al. 2020).

Allium sativum L.

Garlic (Allium sativum L., Liliaceae), an aromatic herbaceous annual spice, has a long history of use in herbal medicine for the treatment of viral infections like cold and influenza (Stuart 2014). Folkloric herbal mixtures prepared from mature garlic cloves have been established to enhance the immune system (El-Saber Batiha et al. 2020). Garlic extracts have been documented to exhibit antiviral activities against herpes simplex type 1 and 2, human rhinovirus type 2, human cytomegalovirus (HCMV), parainfluenza virus type 3, and influenza B, via the production of neutralizing antibodies. This has been ascribed to the presence of several phytochemicals like allicin, allyl methyl thiosulfinate, and methyl allyl thiosulfinate (Sawai et al. 2008; Gruhlke et al. 2016; El-Saber Batiha et al. 2020). Some of these active garlic constituents exhibit their actions via mechanisms ranging from the prevention of critical thiol enzymes and adhesive interaction and fusion of leukocytes to enhancing natural killer-cell (NK-cell) activity that destroys virus-infected cells (El-Saber Batiha et al. 2020).
**Lannea schweinfurthii Engl.**

Methanol extract of *Lannea schweinfurthii* Engl., Anacardiaceae, stem bark shows strong antiviral activities against herpes simplex virus type 1, vesicular stomatitis virus T2, Coxsackie B2, and Semliki Forest A7 in a research carried out by Maregesi et al. (2008). In vitro study conducted by Maregesi et al. (2010), using the microdilution assay, also demonstrated the anti-HIV activities of aqueous and methanol extracts of *L. schweinfurthii* stem bark against human immunodeficiency virus type 1 (HIV-1, IIIB strain) and type 2 (HIV-2, ROD strain) and established the superior efficacy of the 80% methanol extract (Maroyi 2019).

**Pterocaulon spp.**

Furthermore, the use of several species of the genus *Pterocaulon*, Asteraceae, as decoctions or infusions in ethnomedicine is widespread. Apart from coumarins that are abundant across the genus, flavonoids, terpenes, and polycyclylenes have also been identified as active constituents (Medeiros-Neves et al. 2018). Extracts and compounds isolated from these species have been tested for antiviral activities against DNA (human cytomegalovirus) and RNA viruses (Ross River virus and poliovirus type 1) with positive outcomes against poliovirus. In a crystal violet assay conducted at a non-cytotoxic concentration of 6–52 μg/ml, the extract of *Pterocaulon* spp. inhibited poliovirus-induced CPE by more than 75% (Semple et al. 1998). Similarly, a flavonoid, chrysospenosol C, isolated from the extract demonstrated activity against poliovirus with an EC50 of 0.27 μg/ml (0.75 μM) (Semple et al. 1999; Medeiros-Neves et al. 2018).

**Illicium verum Hook. f.**

Star anise (*Illicium verum* Hook. f., Schisandraceae), an evergreen, shrub-like tree with star-shaped fruit, is widespread and popularly sought for its culinary and ethnomedicinal values in southwestern Asia. Many active secondary metabolites belonging to the polyphenolic, flavonoid, tannin, alkaloid, triterpenoid, saponin, and anthraquinone classes of phytochemicals were found to be present in star anise (SA) and many of these are potent antiviral agents. A popular and widely studied metabolite that is abundant in SA, shikimic acid (3,4,5-trihydroxy-1-cyclohexene-1-carboxylic acid), is a key intermediate of the shikimic acid pathway and is used in the industrial synthesis of the antiviral drug oseltamivir phosphate (OSP) (Candeias et al. 2018). This drug effectively inhibits surface protein neuraminidase (NA) enzyme of the seasonal influenza virus types A and B, avian influenza virus H5N1, and human influenza virus H1N1 (Bradley 2005). Apart from shikimic acid, several other molecules with prominent antiviral effects have also been identified in SA. These include the novel illiverin A and tashironin A as well as other aromatic compounds with considerable anti-HIV activity (Song et al. 2007). The inhibitory efficacy of essential oils from star anise against HSV-1 and HSV-2 has also been demonstrated in vitro (Patra et al. 2020). Extracts of star anise not contaminated with the Japanese variant of the plant could be well tolerated in animals to a large extent. However, oral use of up to 500 mg/kg of the ethylacetate extract has been linked with convulsion and lethal toxicity in mice as a result of the veranisatins phytoconstituents which, at lower dosages, are also responsible for the analgesic and sedative properties of the plant (Wang et al. 2011).

**Lysiphyllum strychnifolium (W. G. Craib) A. Schmitz**

A recent study has suggested that *Lysiphyllum strychnifolium* (W. G. Craib) A. Schmitz, Fabaceae, could be a promising source of novel neuraminidase inhibitors active against the influenza virus since the ethanolic extracts of the leaves and stems of the plant demonstrated considerable inhibitory activities against avian influenza virus subtype H5N1 (Sukprasert et al. 2020).

**Antiviral Phytochemicals**

**Polyphenolics and Flavonoids**

The antiviral effects of some common flavonoids and phenolic acids widely present in dietary and medicinal plants against life-threatening viral infections have been established (Anu and Thomas 2019). Flavonoids are a ubiquitous group of biactive phytochemicals in plants and plant-based food. The inhibitory efficacy of flavonoids such as baicain, myricetin, quercetin, pinocembrin, and kaempferol-7-O-glucoside against HIV1/HIV 2 via various mechanisms has been demonstrated (Cushnie and Lamb 2005; Anu and Thomas 2019). (-)-Epigallocatechin gallate (EGCG) could prevent HIV attachment and infection by binding to CD4 expressed on T-cell and destroying the phospholipids in the viral envelope (Anu and Thomas 2019). Similarly, EGCG and other flavonoids like myricetin, epicatechin gallate, gallolechin gallate, and luteolin proved to be potent against the dreaded Zika virus responsible for microcephaly and Guillain-Barre syndrome in the infants (Carneiro et al. 2016; Lim et al. 2017; Anu and Thomas 2019). For instance, rutin is effective against HSV 2/HSV 1, avian influenza virus, and parainfluenza virus while its aglycone, quercetin, is toxic to a host of viruses including poliovirus, dengue virus, rhinovirus, respiratory syncytial virus, Epstein-Barr virus, adenovirus, and HCV (Ben-Shabat et al. 2020). The antiviral mechanisms of quercetin could involve direct inhibition of replication, as in the case of dengue virus type-2 (Zandi et al. 2011), viral genome transcription, and protein synthesis, as in the case of rhinoviruses (Ganesan et al. 2012), or by affecting the processes of viral attachment and entry (Ben-Shabat et al. 2020). The antiviral properties of other flavonoids are well documented and could proceed by...
mechanisms including inhibiting nucleoprotein production in viruses like the avian influenza H5N1 virus (Sithisarn et al. 2013; Ben-Shabat et al. 2020). Another flavone glycoside, baicalin, has demonstrated activity against many viruses, including dengue virus (Moghaddam et al. 2014), respiratory syncytial virus (Shi et al. 2016), enterovirus (Li et al. 2015), human immunodeficiency virus (Li et al. 2000), and hepatitis B virus (Huang et al. 2017) through various mechanisms (Ben-Shabat et al. 2020).

### Terpenoids

Apart from flavonoids, terpenoids hold promising antiviral properties. Over 80% HSV-1 inhibition was reported for monoterpene glycolides including 1,8-cineole (2), thymol, α-terpineol (3), α-terpinene, and γ-terpinene (Astani et al. 2010; Yang et al. 2020). Isoborneol (4) present in many volatile oils could totally inhibit HSV-1 replication at a concentration of 0.06%. Similarly, tereticornate A (5) isolated from Eucalyptus globulus Labill., Myrtaceae, showed higher anti-HSV-1 potency (IC₅₀ 0.96 μg/ml) than the standard antiviral drug, acyclovir (IC₅₀ 1.92 μg/ml) (Yang et al. 2020).

Putranjivain-A (6), a diterpene from the plant Euphorbia jolkinii Boiss., Euphorbiaceae, reportedly showed considerable anti-HSV-2 potency (IC₅₀ 6.3 μM), and similar effects against HSV-1 were shown by triterpenes like moronic acid (7) (EC₅₀ 3.9 μg/ml) and betulonic acid (8) (EC₅₀ 2.6 μg/ml) (Cheng et al. 2004; Kurokawa et al. 1999; Yang et al. 2020). Significant inhibition of hepatitis B virus (HBV) and hepatitis C virus (HCV) was demonstrated by artemisinin and its derivatives (Wohlfarth and Efferth 2009). A semisynthetic derivative of artemisinin, artesunate, is a more effective inhibitor of hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg) and it is capable of a synergistic interaction with lamivudine (an orthodox anti-HBV drug). Also, a pentacyclic triterpenoid, betulinic acid, that could be found in Syzygium claviflorum (Roxb.) Wall.ex Steud., Myrtaceae, and its derivatives possess anti-HIV activity. These compounds are capable of disrupting fusion between the HIV virus and cells as well as inhibiting reverse transcriptase activity and assembly of the virus (Yang et al. 2020). Common triterpenoids of plant origin like oleanolic acid and ursolic acid could both reduce HCV NS5B RdRp virulence (Kong et al. 2013) and inhibit enterovirus replication (Ben-Shabat et al. 2020; Zhao et al. 2014).
Herbs for the Treatment of Coronavirus-Dependent Diseases

Plants and plant products could be useful sources of drug-like molecules for combating coronavirus-dependent diseases. The 2002 SARS episode witnessed the effective combination of traditional Chinese herbal medicine with western medicine in the treatment of infections with clinically improved symptoms typified by relief/improvement in elevated body temperature, cough and breathing difficulties, and general quality of life (Liu et al. 2012; Li et al. 2020). Yang et al. (2016) demonstrated the toxicity of three medicinal plants, Camellia japonica L., Theaeeae, Saposhnikovia divaricata (Turcz.) Schischk., Apiaceae, and Dryopteris crassirhizoma Nakai, Dryopteridaceae, against porcine epidemic diarrhea virus (PEDV) via inhibition of PEDV replication. PEDV is a coronavirus responsible for serious infections and high mortality in pigs. Four structurally representative oleanane-triterpenes characterized from C. japonica were found to reduce the RNA levels of GP6 nucleocapsid, GP2 spike, and GP5 membrane protein which are key genes and proteins required for PEDV replication in a comparable or even superior manner to the positive control, azauridin. Coumarins extracted from S. divaricata exhibited dose-dependent anti-PEDV activity and a novel coumarin from the plant was shown to exhibit stronger activity than the positive control, azauridin. The authors established the role of functionalization and the importance of structure-function relationship in the antiviral properties of the phytochemicals. Further, the inhibitory activity of D. crassirhizoma against PEDV was attributed to the constituent chlorogluconyl phytochemicals.

Baicalin, characterized from Scutellaria baicalensis Georgi, Lamiaceae, a popular plant in Chinese herbal medicine, was shown alongside established antiviral drugs like lopinavir, ribavirin, and rimantadine, to exhibit detectable in vitro antiviral activities in clinical isolates of SARS coronavirus using the fetal rhesus monkey kidney (fRHK-4) cell line (Chen et al. 2004). The use of intravenous baicalin for alternative treatment where available and affordable was suggested. Apart from SARS viruses, baicalin could inhibit HIV-1 at the level of cellular entry, by conjugating with selected chemokines thus interfering with their capacity to activate critical cellular receptors, and at the level of HIV-1 reverse transcriptase by the inhibition of the enzyme possibly via interfering with the binding of viral RNA to the transcriptase near the active site of the enzyme (Chen et al. 2004). A study conducted by Wen et al. (2007) to evaluate several phytocompounds including terpenoids, lignoids, and curcumin for anti-SARS-CoV activities using a cell-based assay measuring SARS-CoV-induced cytopathogenic effect on Vero E6 cells showed promising effects of some of the compounds. The authors submitted that specific abietane-type diterpenoids and lignoids exhibit strong anti-SARS-CoV effects.

The antiviral activity of the ethanol extract of Sambucus formosana Nakai, Viburnaceae, a Chinese medicinal herb with ethnomedical applications against inflammation and viral infections, and the constituent phenolics, against human coronavirus NL63 was investigated (Weng et al. 2019). The extract exhibited relatively weak cytotoxic but concentration-dependent anti-HCoV-NL63 activity typified by a significant reduction of virus yield, plaque formation, and virus attachment. Phenolic acids from the plant, caffeic acid, chlorogenic acid, and gallic acid, were suggested to be responsible, at least in part, for the antiviral capacity having demonstrated the capacity to reduce the production of progeny HCoV-NL63 particles in vitro. The authors pointed out that caffeic acid could play an important antiviral role by influencing the binding of HCoVNL63 to the ACE 2 receptor and co-receptors.

In a study by Li and colleagues (2005) using 3-(4,5-dimethylthiazol-2-yl)-5-(3-carboxymethoxyphenyl)-2-(4-sulfophenyl)-2H-tetrazolium inner salt (MTS) assay for virus-induced cytopathic effect (CPE), four Chinese medicinal herb extracts with potential antiviral activity were identified. The most potent of the extracts, Lycoris radiata (L’Her.) Herb., Amaryllidaceae, was further subjected to an in-depth characterization that led to the discovery of the active SARS-CoV agent, lycorine with an EC50 value of 15.7 ± 1.2 nM, a CC50 value of 14,980.0 ± 912.0 nM (in cytotoxicity assay), and a selective index (SI) > 900.

Potential Herbs Against Coronavirus Disease 2019

It is established that a healthy immune system is advantageous and protective against the clinical and mortal effect of SARS-CoV2 infection. Certain phytochemicals prevalent in fruits and leafy vegetables are capable of promoting healthy immune responses by providing antioxidants polyphenols and bioactive agents able to modulate immune functions (Calder et al. 2020; Zhang and Liu 2020). The genome of SARS-CoV2 shares close similarity with those of previously pandemic SARS coronaviruses like SARS-CoV and MERS-CoV fuelling the possibility that herbs and medications found to be effective in previous incidences of coronavirus diseases could also be beneficial in the treatment of COVID-19 (Gasmi et al. 2020). The therapeutic efficacy of some medicinal plants is traceable to their antioxidant phytochemicals notably the polyphenols and flavonoids (Komolafe et al. 2017) and some of these possess inhibitory effects on 3 chymotrypsin-like protease (3CLpro) essential for the replication of coronaviruses like...
MERS-CoV and SARS-COV (Gasmi et al. 2020). A comprehensive molecular docking analysis by Murugan et al. (2020) revealed a highly promising therapeutic potential of *A. paniculata* diterpenoid, neoandrographolide, against the SARS-COV-2 virus. The compound showed strong interactions with key proteins responsible for viral replication, namely 3-chymotrypsin-like protease, 3CLpro (31.4 kcal/mol), and papain-like proteinase, PLpro (28.5 kcal/mol), as well as RNA-directed RNA polymerase, RdRp (24.1 kcal/mol), involved in RNA synthesis and spike protein responsible for host cell recognition.

The suppressive effect that some flavonoids like quercetin, helichrysetin, rhoifolin, pectolinarin (9), and isobavachalcone (10) have on MERS-CoV, SARS-CoV, and even hepatitis C virus has been demonstrated to be through 3CLpro inhibition (Ryu et al. 2010; Gasmi et al. 2020; Joe et al. 2020). Ryu et al. (2010), while establishing some basic structure-activity relationships of flavonoids, demonstrated the inhibitory effects (IC\(_{50}\)) of apigenin (280.8 μM), quercetin (23.8 μM), luteolin (11) (20.2 μM), and a biflavone amentoflavone (12) (8.3 μM) which exhibited the highest potency, against coronavirus 3C-like proteases. This suggests that herbs and herbal products with 3CLpro inhibitory activity might help combat SARS-CoV2 particularly since the virus causes the upregulation of 3CLpro expression (Prajapat et al. 2020).

### Traditional Chinese Medicine and COVID-19

Many COVID-19 patients in China have at one time or the other been treated with herbal formulations that modulate the T-cells and enhance host defense mechanisms (Patel et al. 2020; Yang et al. 2020). A review of the herbal treatment recommended for the management of pediatric COVID-19 by the Chinese provincial guidelines showed that the medicinal herbs *Scutellariae radix*, *Artamisiae annuae herba*, *Belamcandae rhizoma*, *Armeniacae semen*, *Coicis semen*, *Ephedrae herba*, and *Gypsum fibrosum* individually or collectively form vital components of the approved herbal formulations. Some of the herbs including *Artemisiae annuae herba*, *Scutellariae radix* (through its component, baicalin), *Ephedrae herba*, and *Gypsum fibrosum* possess established antiviral properties against influenza or pneumonia. Others like *Armeniacae semen* and *Coicis semen* are useful for the treatment of upper respiratory tract infection (Ang et al. 2020).

Liu et al. (2020) highlighted the advantages of Chinese herbal formulations with potential usefulness in the management of COVID-19 infection and its hallmark pneumonia and respiratory symptoms. *Qingfei Paidu* decoction is a combination of classical TCM prescriptions for treating cold pathogens and its chemical substances showed an inhibitory effect on 3CL protein of coronavirus (Liu 2020; Zhao et al. 2020). Another herbal formula *Pneumonia no. 1*, compounded from five Chinese herbal medi-
cines, has been clinically tested on COVID-19 patients with the mild form of the disease with over 50% reversal of symptoms and no patient progressing to the severe form of the disease (Liu 2020). Shufeng Jiedu Capsule (SFJDC), another herbal formula, was shown to act additively with arbidol (a broad-spectrum antiviral compound) in improving respiratory system symptoms such as fever, cough, chest tightness, and shortness of breath in COVID-19 mild disease patients (Liu 2020).

A multi-herbal formulation, Pudilan (PDL), used in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) for heat-clearing and detoxification and clinically employed recently with appreciable success as an anti-SARS-CoV-2 infective agent, was evaluated for therapeutic potential against COVID-19 using network pharmacology tools (Kong et al. 2020). The findings show that the anti-COVID-19 mechanism of PDL proceeds via inhibition of angiotensin-converting enzyme 2 (ACE2) and prevention of SARS-CoV-2 entry into cells. The herbal extract might also prevent the cytokine storm though negative interactions with pro-inflammatory cytokines and factors (Kong et al. 2020).

Saikosaponins A (13) and D (14) are capable of preventing coronaviruses viral penetration and early-stage CoVs infection, while luteolin from Veronica linariifolia Pall. Ex Link, Plantaginaceae, and tetra-O-galloyl-β-D-glucose (15) from Rhus chinensis Mill., Anacardiaceae, could suppress the coronaviruses by binding to the virus surface spike proteins (Patel et al. 2020; Yang et al. 2020). In a study involving virtual screening of antiviral compounds from plants to identify promising lead molecules for SARS-CoV-2 main protease (Mpro) enzyme, an essential target involved in viral polyprotein processing, the binding affinity of selected small drug-like molecules to the main proteases of SARS-CoV-2, SARS-CoV, and MERS-CoV was determined using molecular docking. Bonducellpin D (16), which showed higher binding affinity (−9.28 kcal/mol) as compared to the control (−8.24 kcal/mol), was identified as the best lead molecule. The authors suggested that Bonducellpin D could be a promising drug candidate since it also exhibited broad-spectrum inhibition potential against SARS-CoV Mpro and MERS-CoV Mpro and the high similarity of SARS-CoV-2 Mpro to SARS-CoV Mpro (96.08%) and MERS-CoV Mpro (50.65%) (Gurung et al. 2020).

Furthermore, a clinical trial was conducted to assess the safety and efficacy of Lianhuaqingwen capsule, a Chinese herbal product, in 284 COVID-19 patients randomized to receive usual treatment alone or in combination with the herbal formulations (Hu et al. 2021). The rate of recovery from symptoms (coughing, fatigue, fever) was taken as the primary indicator of effectiveness. It was shown that herbs had no adverse effects at the evaluated doses while treatment shortened the overall recovery time (median: 7 vs. 10 days, p < 0.001). Also, patients on formulations had better chest computed tomographic manifestations and were relieved of symptoms including coughing (7 vs. 10 days), fatigue (3 vs. 6 days), and fever (2 vs. 3 days) faster than those not on the herbal formulations.

**Indian Ayurvedic Medicine and COVID-19**

The Indian Ayurveda traditional system of medicine has relatively limited literature documentation on the treatment of coronavirus disease 2019 unlike the Chinese traditional medicine. A case report reputed to be the first of his kind by Girija and Sivan (2020) demonstrated the successful treatment of a COVID-19-positive patient entirely with Ayurveda Indian medicine. According to the authors, the patient who presented with severe symptoms of high fever, body pain, and cough along with other COVID-19 symptoms relied on Ayurvedic medicines comprising of Sudarshan Churna and Dhanvantara Gutika tablets, Talisadi Churna with honey, and a regulated diet. Almost all symptoms were arrested, and smell was partially restored after 16 days of treatment while blood samples taken after 31 days of treatment came out negative for the SARS-COV2 IgM antibody.

A magazine publication mentioned that COVID-19 patients were successfully treated at the All India Institute of Ayurveda (AI(A) Health Centre in Delhi with Ayurvedic treatment protocol, including diet and yoga. The positive
development prompted the AYUSH ministry to submit that the traditional system of medicine could be exploited as it holds a huge potential in preventive and curative healthcare of the pandemic (PTI 2020).

A discussion on a joint Indian and US trials of Ayurveda formulations for COVID-19 recently took place. Indian researchers on Ayurvedic medicine proposed Ashwagandha, an Ayurvedic medicine, for COVID-19 treatment. It was suggested that the withanone phytoconstituent of the plant could work with caffeic acid phenethyl ester (CAPE), the active ingredient in propolis, to influence the replicative enzyme(s) in the SARS-COV-2 (TrialSiteNews 2020). The preliminary report by the NIH suggests there is no evidence yet that the treatment works but that there is evidence of contamination by metals (e.g., mercury and lead) in many of the Ayurvedic medicinal products under investigation (TrialSiteNews 2020).

**African Traditional Medicine and COVID-19**

Many African countries are encouraging or taking active measures aimed at developing indigenous herbal medicine to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. A herbal remedy, “Covid-Organics,” formulated from artemisia (used in malaria treatment) and other Malagasy plants and claimed to prevent or cure COVID-19 was launched in Madagascar with several other African countries showing interest in obtaining it. The government of South Africa indicated its willingness to assist authorities in Madagascar to test and analyze the Covid-Organics (Finnan 2020). In Nigeria, the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC) saddled with the responsibility of ensuring adequate control and minimum standards for both conventional and herbal drugs in the nation was directed by the Ministry of Health to assess the efficacy and safety of a plant-based cough mixture as treatment for COVID-19 (Adebowale 2020). This followed series of calls by natural health practitioners and experts on the need for developing indigenous solutions to the pandemic. According to the Health Authority, constituent herbs of the herbal mixture which include *Allium sativa* (garlic); *Allium cepa* (onion); *Zingiber officinale* (ginger); *Piper guineense* (West African black pepper); and *Adansonia digitata* (baobab fruit) have scientific evidence of use in the management of respiratory infections and possess anti-inflammatory and antiviral effects (Adebowale 2020). Many important personalities in the socio-cultural spheres also lent their voices to the calls for the development of scientifically validated indigenous herbal alternatives to combat COVID-19. A paramount traditional ruler with historical reputation of being the guardian of the socio-cultural affair of the Yoruba people of Southwestern Nigeria proposed a partnership with traditional medicine practitioners to create an herbal formula from different botanicals including *Newbouldia laevis* (boundary tree), *Azadirachta indica* (neem), *Allium cepa* (onion), *Anchomanes difformis* (forest anchomanes, Blume), *Tetrapleura tetraptera* (Aidan fruit), *Xylopia aethiopica* (African pepper), and *Vernonia amygdalina* (bitter leaf) as well as sulfur for the treatment of the dreaded viral infection (Oluremi 2020). There are recent reports on the potential relevance of Jobelyn, a *Sorghum bicolor* extract, for the management of COVID-19. The herbal medicinal product, often marketed as dietary supplement, was subjected to clinical trials for safety and effectiveness in the management of widespread anemic conditions, including sickle cell disease. Jobelyn is reputed to be capable of boosting the antioxidant profile and the immune system by increasing CD4 T-lymphocyte count with potential positive outcomes in COVID-19 treatment (SickleCellNews 2020).

Fatoki et al. (2020) employed gene network analysis, molecular docking, and sequence and structure dynamics simulations to identify therapeutic compounds and phytochemicals with potential to modulate the expression network of genes involved in SARS-CoV-2 pathology in the human host and to understand the dynamics of key proteins involved in the virus-host interactions. Their findings revealed that ellagitannins and friedelanone (17) showed high binding energies against 3-chymotrypsin-like protease (3CLpro), papain-like protease (PLpro), helicase (nsp13), RNA-dependent RNA polymerase (nsp12), 2′-O-ribose methyltransferase (nsp16) of SARS-CoV-2 and DNA-PK and CK2 alpha in human. They also revealed that medicinal plants containing phytochemicals such as caffeine (18), ellagic acid (19), and quercetin could be beneficial in COVID-19 therapy (Fatoki et al. 2020).
Herbal Medicine and Salient Issues

Medicinal Plants and Herbal Formulation Uses: Myths and Facts

There is a recent resurgence of interest in herbal medicine even where there were no historically rooted cultural practices or acceptance. This is probably as a result of (i) better public awareness following improved packaging and market strategies with claims of effectiveness of herbal products on multiple diseases; (ii) the popular, market-driven belief that herbal medicines, because they are from a natural source, are more effective and safer than orthodox drugs, and (iii) the relatively high cost of orthodox medicines and the ease in obtaining herbs without necessarily going for interview-style consultations by those drifting towards self-medications. Also, those with a cultural history of the use of herbs in the management of diseases often believe that the diagnosis and prognosis of some endemic diseases can only be fully comprehended by traditionalists and practitioners of herbal medicine but not by orthodox physicians. The increasing popularity and availability of herbal medicine have brought issues of their safety and herb-drug interactions to the fore of global concern especially in the light of the recent pandemic. One positive side of the traditional system of medicine is the long history of application in the treatment of diseases based on empirical knowledge spanning several centuries or millenniums. This enhances safety in many cultural settings as a systematic selection of medicinal plants for use would have made toxic fatalities uncommon. Compelling results from experimental investigations have validated the safety, particularly in animal models, of some herbs and herbal medicine. However, there is a widespread belief that herbal medicines are generally safe and this could make consumers fail to take cognizance of adverse reactions and thus underreporting such cases (Neergheen-Bhujun 2013). Also, a sizeable number of those who use herbal medicine as the primary source of healthcare are illiterates or semi-illiterates from rural areas of developing countries where documentation ethics and access to facilities may be elusive. This may also contribute to the dearth of information on the toxicity of herbs and issues of herb-drug interactions. This is because in such instances, the efficacy of such drugs is rated by the judgment and testimonies of previous users which are solely based on the therapeutic effects on the intended pathological condition with very little information on the side effects or toxicity. Tactical marketing strategies, aimed at highlighting the strengths but not the limitations, are also employed by herbal sales representatives to project products into greater limelight. Among those with a cultural history of herbal use in disease management, there is historic oral information on the efficacy of specific herbal drugs against clearly identified pathological conditions. This is sufficient to advertise the products to potential buyers and users.

The efficacy of herbs used in traditional systems of medicines cannot be downplayed but there is a call to exercise caution when using herbal products. There is a common misconception that herbal medicines are completely safe and without adverse effects. Herbs could produce undesirable or toxic effects that could be serious or even fatal and the literature is replete with numerous examples of such cases (Ekor 2014; Mensah et al. 2019). These notwithstanding, traditional/herbal medicine could be safe when used appropriately as dietary/food supplements or medicines. In a few reported cases of herbal toxicity too, only weak or no causal association between the use of herb and toxic responses could be substantiated (Neergheen-Bhujun 2013).

Pertinent Issues of Herbal Medicinal Uses

Major uncertainties with the use of herbal products are quality assurance issues, non-compliance with standard production practice (WHO 2004; Palombo 2006), and little information relating to effective use and approaches (Mensah et al. 2019).

Issues Relating to Standardization and Regulation

Ordinarily, herbal medicines are supposed to be licensed and have a product license validating their safety, quality, and efficacy just like their orthodox counterparts. They should contain information on indications, contraindications, treatment regimen, and side effects spelt out on a leaflet accompanying the medicine. Since the major determinants of toxicity of drugs or herbal products are actually dosage and time of exposure, lack of well-elucidated or validated information on dosages and treatment regimen of herbal medicines would constitute a major challenge. Licensing protocols for the production and marketing of herbal medicines are usually relaxed such that little or no evidence of the efficacy and safety is required before marketing (Ekor 2014) thus lowering the quality of production. The failure of regulatory agencies in some countries, for example, the US FDA, to include herbal products and phytopharmaceuticals within their purview expose consumers to further risks. Based on the peculiarities of herbal products, meeting the required stringent conditions for drug approval could be difficult, hence the creation of alternative and simplified herbal registration scheme like the Traditional Herbal Medicines Registration Scheme introduced in the UK which ensures that minimum safety and quality standard are met while other relevant information is spelt out to promote the safe use of medicines (Raynor et al. 2011; Ekor 2014). The NAFDAC performs a similar role in Nigeria and many herbal drugs have been subjected to NAFDAC scrutiny with operational and marketing licenses granted to the companies responsible for their production. However, as common in many developing countries, there are many unregistered and poorly regulated herbal products being sold without restraint in the market and by trado-medical practitioners. In fact, some herbs in Southwestern Nigeria are termed “200-diseases remedy”
whereby one herb or herbal mixture is claimed to exhibit scientifically unproven therapeutic effects against many unrelated pathological conditions. There are claims by some herbal medicine practitioners on the availability of drugs for COVID-19 managements just as there are reports of indiscriminate uses of antimalarial herbal preparations to combat COVID-19 (Team AUC-R et al. 2020). Obviously perturbed by the spate of increasing herbal formulations on sale for COVID-19 management in the region, the WHO-established Regional Expert Committee on Traditional Medicine for COVID-19, the Africa Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, and the African Union Commission for Social Affairs recently approved a protocol for phase III clinical trials of herbal medicine for COVID-19. Terms of reference for the establishment of a data and safety monitoring board for herbal medicine clinical trials were also given (Africa 2020).

Issues Relating to Quality Control of Products

Despite the preponderance of phytomedicines in the markets in many countries, there are poor quality control measures for these products and the stringent regulations that are in place for orthodox medicines are absent. Quality irregularities of herbal products of different production batch and production timeframe are not uncommon, and this has a direct consequence on the efficacy and safety of such products. A review of laboratory and clinical evidence on the effects of multi-component herbal products in the management of chemotherapy-associated toxicity and side effects established the ameliorative effects of herbs on most side effects of chemotherapy including neurotoxicity, hematotoxicity, cardiotoxicity, and nephrotoxicity (Fu et al. 2018). However, the authors pointed out the inconsistency in product quality as well as lack of mechanistic and pharmacokinetic studies as troubling limitations. Existing regulatory bodies for herbal products vary from country to country and there is often a lack of standardized analytical methods (Raclariu et al. 2018). Currently, this scenario is very much applicable to most COVID-19 herbal formulations. Actually, quality control of herbal products is a complex process involving physical, chemical, and biological procedures as well as the deployment of various analytical methods and tools (Kunle et al. 2012). Herbs at the point of collection are subjected to physical screening including macro- and microscopic examination to remove adulterants like foreign organic matter. Analyses of the ash contents, crude fiber contents, and moisture contents could give valuable information on the identity, purity, and stability of the crude drugs. Qualitative (using infrared and ultraviolet techniques) and quantitative chemical evaluations are employed to identify, characterize, and quantify the phytochemical constituents in the crude drug. The quantitative aspects involve the use of various techniques including supercritical fluid chromatograph (SFC), high-performance thin-layer chromatography (HPTLC), high-performance liquid chromatography (HPLC), gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC-MS) (Balekundri and Mannur 2020) and the HPLC-electrospray ionization-mass spectrometry (HPLC-ESI-MS). The versatility of HPLC to efficiently profile compounds in herbal extracts and the rapid structural characterization by MS afford a new practicable approach to identifying unknown herbal constituents (Yang et al. 2009; Kumar 2017). DNA barcoding is a genomics-based tool for taxonomic identification. Based on molecular and computational information, it uses standardized DNA regions, named DNA barcodes, to identify a species or taxon, providing the authentication of raw plant material. When combined with high-resolution analytical chromatographic instrumentation, DNA barcoding could afford marked impact in the quality control of herbal drugs and phytopharmaceuticals, as well as in the safety and regulation of herbal products and the discovery and development of herbal drugs (Gesto-Borroto et al. 2021). For example, three ginseng species (Panax, Araliaceae) are commercially cultivated: P. ginseng C. A. Meyer (ginseng), P. quinquefolius L. (American ginseng), and P. notoginseng (Burkill) F.H. Chen ex C. Y. Wu et K M. Feng (Sanqi). Panax ginseng and P. quinquefolius are widely used in the treatment and healthcare for respiratory diseases (Zhang et al. 2020). Ginseng can exert direct antiviral effects by inhibiting viral attachment, membrane penetration, and replication; the foremost antiviral activities of ginseng are attributed to the enhancement of host immunity (Im et al. 2016). Several candidate DNA regions or markers were evaluated to establish a more accurate and effective identification for these ginseng species, and the combination of psbA-trnH and ITS was found to be the most successful ones for their identification (Zuo et al. 2011). In addition, toxicological studies establish potentially toxic components and ascertain safety in animals just as microbial analyses are conducted to establish the presence or absence of harmful microbial contaminations (Kunle et al. 2012).

Issues Relating to Production Practices/Ethics

Particularly widespread among ethnic groups in many developing nations, herbal drugs are not produced under the most hygienic and standard conditions and there is no specification of appropriate doses for treatments. Against this backdrop, the safety of traditional and herbal medicines is a major concern to health authorities and individuals (Ekor 2014). There are instances when herbal preparations are deliberately or inadvertently adulterated with undeclared active components or pharmaceutical substances during production thereby changing the course of pharmacology or toxicology of such products. Reports of alleged contamination of some Ayurvedic medicinal products under investigation for COVID-19 management by metals like mercury and lead readily come to
mind (TrialSiteNews 2020). With the numerous cases of herbal preparations for the management of COVID-19 by in non-standard settings and without appropriate regulation of production setups, the possibilities of harmful adulterations cannot be ruled out.

Issues Relating to Interactions of Herbs with Metabolizing Enzymes and Allopathic Drugs

The bioactive compounds in plants are vast and vary in terms of structure and chemical properties within and among species. The various bioactive components in herbal medicine are most times largely uncharacterized and they could induce or suppress drug-metabolizing enzymes and xenobiotic transporters with varying consequences when co-administered with conventional drugs (Oga et al. 2016). It has been observed that some of the adverse effects ascribed to herbs could be due to interactions with exogenously introduced agents like drugs (allopathic medicines). Herbs could interact with orthodox medicines to cause increased or decreased pharmacological or toxicological effects of both types of medicine. Such herb-drug interactions could result in a synergistic or additive effect with potentially lethal implications. For instance, reports have shown that bleeding is drastically increased when Gingko biloba extract is used concomitantly with conventional drugs like aspirin or warfarin (Pezzani et al. 2019). The dried rhizome and roots of Glycyrrhiza glabra L., Fabaceae, known as liquorice, are used extensively in TCM as one of the components of herbal formulations for the treatment of respiratory infections and management of COVID-19 (Liu 2020). The herbal product was reported to be capable of interfering with the pharmacokinetics of orthodox medicines (De Smet and D’Arcy 1996).

In some cases, co-administration of herbs with conventional drugs could result in adverse effects that are distinct from the pharmacological effects of either the drug or the herb. For example, garlic and Ginko react with aspirin with the potential side effects of increasing the risk of bleeding whereas hawthorn interacts with digoxin to cause arrhythmias (Naveed et al. 2020).

Issues Relating to the Intrinsic Toxicity of Herbs

A few phytoconstituents are documented in traditional medicine to be intrinsically toxic or poisonous (Fennell et al. 2004; Ekor 2014; Kuete 2014; Mensah et al. 2019). The issue of the possible toxicity and mutagenicity of plants used in traditional medicine has been reviewed (Ekor 2014; Mensah et al. 2019). Some examples of toxic herbal remedies for the treatment of respiratory conditions are the following: Ephedra sinica Stapf Ephedra (Ephedra sinica Stapf, Ephedraceae) is one of the herbs used for making potent herbal preparations and with a long history of application, especially in traditional Chinese medicine, for the treatment of respiratory maladies including asthma, allergies, bronchitis, and flu. The herb is also marketed in the USA as a weight loss dietary supplement. However, the use has been associated with several serious adverse effects on the cardiovascular and central nervous systems (Chen et al. 2010; Hackman et al. 2006; Verduin and Labbate 2002). According to a review of the Ephedra species by González-Juárez et al. (2020), the adverse effects of the plants, including the severe forms of cardiovascular disorders, myocardial infarction, and cardiac arrest, are caused by (−)-ephedrine and (+)-pseudoephedrine active constituents.

Glycyrrhiza glabra L. Licorice (G. glabra) is a common herb used for the treatment of upper respiratory tract inflammation and for suppressing ulcers in the gastric gland and the duodenum. The prolong usage, however, is accompanied by severe side effects. The herbs could suppress the renin-aldosterone-angiotensin system (RAAS) with the accompanying physiological consequences including sodium and water retention, hypokalemia, hypertension, and cardiomyopathy (Neergheen-Bhujun 2013). Lantana camara L. Lantana camara L., Verbenaceae, is one of the plants used in traditional system of medicine in the management of respiratory disorders including tuberculosis, asthma, and catarrhal infections (Kirimuhuzya et al. 2009). In a review work on the use of herbs and the associated challenges, Mensah et al. (2019) highlighted hepatotoxicity of L. camara in animal models following chronic usage.

Pertinent Suggestions

The validation of adverse reactions to herbal medicines and herbal products is important but could be complicated by various factors. Although in vitro cellular studies are popularly used and considerably valuable in evaluating the cytotoxicity of herbs and herbal products, they are best carried out under in vivo conditions since the complicated toxic responses under in vivo settings cannot be elucidated by toxic responses in cells. Under in vivo conditions, exposure to certain hepatic enzymes could influence the toxicity of herbs by producing toxic metabolites (increasing toxicity) or promoting detoxification (decreasing toxicity) of toxic metabolites. Also, cellular models might not be able to account for tissue penetration, clearance, and excretion of herbal products (McGaw et al. 2014).

Co-administration of herbs and drugs, particularly in developing countries, could be more than is reported or imagined among patients undergoing treatment for various pathological conditions and this raises particular safety concerns. It is important for relevant health institutions and practitioners to carry out adequate monitoring of patients for such developments. The high incidences of concurrent use of herbal medicines
with orthodox medicines in some climes have prompted healthcare practitioners to request for frequent probing of health behavior and choices of patients (Amaeze et al. 2018). Actually, herbal medicines are not designed, in the traditional context, to be used with other types of medicines as now being commonly done (WHO 2004; Mensah et al. 2019). The tendency to abuse herbs and herbal medicine in rural areas of developing countries is very high due to some factors that include poverty, ready accessibility to herbs, and inaccurate information on the preparation or composition of herbal formulations. Also, insufficient knowledge about dosing could lead to abuse, whether directly or indirectly, since all drugs are poison except when used within the safe limit. Herbs with induced contractive effect on smooth muscles and traditionally used for relieving constipation have been employed at high dosages for abortifacient purposes by the youth due to the effect on endometrial muscles (Mensah et al. 2019). Most importantly, herbs are not to be used without recourse to dosing instead, just like orthodox drugs, guidelines and direction of use in line with the available indigenous/traditional best practices should be followed since each herb or herbal mixture has its unique therapeutic margin and safety threshold. In other words, the use of herbal products, like other types of drugs, should be accompanied by the consciousness of the potential benefits and risks.

**Future Perspectives and Conclusion**

Approximately 80% of the world population relies on herbal medicine and products as a source of healthcare due to the surge in global patronage of alternative and complementary medicine in the last few decades. The rich repertoire of bioactive phytochemicals in plants makes them a potential source of viable therapeutics. The efficacy of herbs against numerous viral diseases and some of the clinical presentations of COVID-19 are well established. COVID-19 affects the respiratory system where it orchestrates deleterious inflammatory changes and presents some level of similarities in terms of symptoms to other respiratory illnesses caused by viruses. SARS-COV2, the causative virus of COVID-19, shares high genome similarity with those of previously pandemic SARS coronaviruses like SARS-CoV and MERS-CoV, both of which were considerably managed by herbal intervention. This coupled with past and emerging experimental findings indicates that herbs could be successfully deployed for the management of COVID-19 symptoms. This is buttressed by the fact that many formulations are already in place or the pipeline in many parts of the world in this regard. Herbal medicine will continue to gain prominence in the healthcare systems of many countries. It is therefore important for governments and regulatory agencies to address the major challenges facing this sector which are the issues of quality assurance, standardization, and regulation. Relevant bodies including the WHO should provide global best practices for the production, administration, and use of herbal medicine with reasonable but stringent measures being put in place as obtained for orthodox drugs. There should also be adequate enlightenment of end-users of herbal medicines. With adequate standardization and regulatory processes, together with proper enlightenment of users, the facts will be separated from fiction and the benefits of herbal medicines could be better deployed to benefit the world.

**Supplementary Information** The online version contains supplementary material available at https://doi.org/10.1007/s43450-021-00132-x.

**Authors’ Contribution** KK, HTF, and ACA conceived the idea presented in this work. KK, RTK, ACA, and BICB were involved in the literature search and preparation of the manuscript. ACA, BICB, MTO, and AAA revised the final draft of the manuscript.

**Declarations**

**Competing Interests** The authors declare no competing interests.

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