

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Use of traditional and complementary medicines by cancer patients at a national cancer referral facility in a low-income country

Amos Deogratius Mwaka^{1,2}  | Sabina Patrick Mangi^{3,4} | Fred Macho Okuku⁵

¹Department of Medicine, School of Medicine, College of Health Sciences, Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda

²Cancer Awareness and Early Detection Coalition (CAEDCO), Kampala, Uganda

³Department of Medicine, St. Francis Hospital Nsambya, Kampala, Uganda

⁴Tosamaganga Council Designated Hospital, Iringa, Tanzania

⁵Uganda Cancer Institute, Kampala, Uganda

Correspondence

Amos Deogratius Mwaka, Department of Medicine, School of Medicine, College of Health Sciences, Makerere University, P.O. Box 7072, Kampala, Uganda.
Email: mwakaad@yahoo.com

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Abstract

Objective: The aim of this study was to describe use of traditional and complementary medicines (T&CM) and associated factors among patients with cancer.

Methods: We conducted a cross-sectional study at the Uganda Cancer Institute (UCI) involving patients with selected solid tumours. Independent variables included age, sex, marital status, cancer site and stage. Main outcome variables were use and disclosure of use of T&CM.

Results: The majority of participants were women ($n = 352$; 81.9%). Breast cancer ($n = 312$; 71.9%) was the predominant cancer type. 55.4% of participants ($n = 240$) self-reported use of T&CM. Among them, 68.3% (140/205) reported using them to treat/cure cancer, 35.6% (72/202) for strengthening the immune system and 31.2% (63/202) for management of pain. Patients with advanced stage cancers were more likely to be users compared with those in stage one. The majority (81.9%, 195/238) of T&CM users did not disclose use to their healthcare professionals. The main reasons for nondisclosure included lack of inquiry by clinicians (79.6%, 117/147) and fear of disapproval and/or rebuke (11.6%, 17/147).

Conclusion: Use of T&CM by patients with cancer under biomedical care is common but often undisclosed to the healthcare professionals.

KEYWORDS

cancers, complementary therapy, sub-Saharan Africa, traditional and complementary medicines, traditional medicine

1 | BACKGROUND

Worldwide, patients with cancer have often used traditional and complementary medicines (T&CM) concurrently with western medicines, or taken recourse to T&CM as the main modality of treatment (Ernst & Cassileth, 1998; Horneber et al., 2012; Shen et al., 2002). Traditional or indigenous medicines refer to practices and approaches based on theories, beliefs and experiences of a given culture or group of people, that are used in maintenance of health, and prevention, diagnosis and treatment of illnesses. The practices

encompass use of natural products derived from plants, animals and minerals, as well as spiritual and physical manipulations applied singularly or in combinations. On the other hand, complementary or alternative medicines refer to a diverse healthcare practices that are not part of a country's own tradition, or not integrated in the country's mainstream healthcare system. These approaches are often used as alternative, or complement to the mainstream health practices in the country (WHO, 2013).

Use of T&CM by patients with cancer has been reported in both high-income and low-income countries. For example, among 435