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Traditional knowledge on medicinal plants used for the treatment of skin diseases in Kanyakumari District, Tamilnadu

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Abstract: India is endowed with rich source of medicinal plants. Herbal medicine is a major component in all indigenous people's traditional medicine and a common element in Ayurvedic, Homeopathic, Naturopathic and Traditional Indian systems of medicine. The in-depth interviews conducted with vaithiyar, siddha, naturopath and local traditional healers yielded a rich source of knowledge about the efficacy of herbal medicines. The main purpose of this study was to find out the common herbal drugs prescribed for the treatment of skin ailments. 30 plant species belonging to 25 genera and 20 families were identified in the treatment of various skin diseases such as dandruff, eczema, leprosy, rash, boils, ringworm, skin tag, skin problems, psoriasis, scars, scleroderma, sun burn, sun poisoning, and itch etc.

Key words: Medicinal plants, traditional medicines, skin diseases, folk medicine.

Introduction

Nearly 80% of the world's population depends upon traditional systems of health care. It is a tragic story that the knowledge about the curative power of herbs acquired over the centuries through trial and error method enhanced by intuitive insights by the ethnic communities is fast disappearing with irreparable damage. It is not an exaggeration to say that modern technology has a deleterious effect in these priceless indigenous systems of medicine passed on orally. Documenting the indigenous knowledge through ethnobotanical studies is of paramount importance for the conservation and utilization of biological resources. Different skin diseases are common among the rural population. It may be due to microbes, fungi or allergy. Many of the patients turn to traditional systems for healing as there is no side effect. An attempt was made to find out the common herbals prescribed by the traditional healers for the treatment of skin diseases.

Methodology

Local traditional healers who use herbals in healing diseases were interviewed from October -December 2009. Adopting the methods of (Jain, 1964) ethno medicinal data were collected through casual conversation with the informants. A questionnaire was used to obtain information on medicinal plants with their local name, parts used, mode of preparation and administration. A total of 6 informants comprising of 4 males and 2 females were interviewed between the ages of 40-62. It was a direct interaction with vaithiyars, siddha doctors, naturopath, and local traditional healers. The herbals prescribed by the healers were collected and identified with the help of the flora available in the library (Matthew, 1983 and Gamble, 1957). Standard methods were followed with regard to the collection of plant
materials, drying, mounting, preparation and preservation of herbarium sheets (Jain and Rao, 1997).

Results and Discussion:

The following plant species were identified for their use in traditional health care system against various skin diseases. The enumeration of plants contains botanical names, family names, local names, mode of preparation and administration.

_Abrus precatorius_ L.  
PAPILIONACEAE (Kunnimuthu)

Equally proportion of root and fresh rhizome of turmeric paste is applied on the wound until it is cured.

_Acalypha indica_ L.  
EUPHORBIACEAE (Kuppaimeni)

The leaves ground with salt and mixed with curd are applied on sores and scabies.

_Acorus calamus_ L.  
ARACEAE (Vasambu)

Rhizomes pounded together with _Curcuma aromatica_ rhizomes and leaves of _Azadirachta indica_ are applied for eczema.

_Aloe vera_ L.  
LILIACEAE (Kattralai)

Juice from leaves of _Aloe vera_ is effective for eczema, psoriasis and sun burn treatment.

_Andrographis paniculata_ Nees.  
ACANTHACEAE (Nilavembu)

Juice from leaves of _Andrographis paniculata_ mixed with cow’s milk is taken orally to cure itching and for killing ringworm.

_Aristolochia bracteata_ Retz.  
ARISTOLOCHIACEAE  
(Aaduthinnapalai)

The paste from the leaves is applied on the affected skin parts.

_Azadirachta indica_ A. Juss.  
MELIACEAE (Vempu)

Leaves and flowers are used for the treatment of skin diseases like boils, eczema and intermittent fevers.

_Calotropis gigantea_ R. Br.  
ASCLEPIDIACEAE (Erukku)

Root bark and powder soaked in butter milk is applied on the dark patches of the skin. The paste from the leaf can be applied on the swollen parts of the body. The latex is used for treating leprosy.

_Cardiospermum halicacabum_ L.  
SAPINDACEAE (Mudakkatraan)

Paste from the entire plant is used for itching of the skin.

_Cassia alata_ L.  
CAESALPINIACEAE (Seemai agathi)

Decoction prepared from the leaves and stems are used for the various skin diseases specially ringworm.

_Cassia fistula_ L.  
CAESALPINIACEAE (Sarakontrai)

Decoction from the root bark is taken internally and paste made from the leaf is applied on the infected area until it is cured.
**Centella asiatica** (L.). Urban.
APIACEAE (Vallarai)
Decoction made from the entire plant is used for leprosy.

**Curcuma aromatica** Salisb.
ZINGIBERACEAE (Kasturimanjal)
Rhizomes of *Curcuma aromatica* and seeds of *Terminalia chebula* are made into a paste and applied on the swollen parts.

**Curcuma longa** L.
ZINGIBERACEAE (Manjal)
The paste made from the rhizome of *Curcuma* is used externally as skin cream.

**Cynodon dactylon** (L.) Pers.
POACEAE (Arugampullu)
Paste made from the grass is applied to cure various skin diseases.

**Euphorbia hirta** L.
EUPHORBIACEAE (Ammanapaccharisi)
Latex is applied for skin parasites and growth of warts on the skin.

**Hemidesmus indicus** R.Br.
PERIPLOCACEAE (Nannari)
Decoction from the root is used for skin infections.

**Indigofera aspalathoides** Vahl.
PAPILIONACEAE (Sivanarvembu)
Paste from the entire plant is applied on the affected parts to cure leprosy.

**Indigofera tinctoria** L.
PAPILIONACEAE (Avuri)
Paste from the leaves is applied on the wounds for until it is cured.

**Mimosa pudica** L.
MIMOSACEAE (Thottalvadi)
Paste from the entire plant is used for cancerous ulcers, skin diseases and glandular swelling.

**Ocimum basilicum** L.
LAMIACEAE L. (Tirunitrupachai)
Leaves and flowers are used for skin infections.

**Ocimum sanctum** L.
LAMIACEAE (Karuntulasi)
Paste of seed and leaf is applied on the skin to cure ring worm. Juice from the leaves is taken internally.

**Ocimum tenuiflorum** L.
LAMIACEAE (Tulasi)
Leaves pounded with *Curcuma aromatica* rhizomes are applied to cure eczema.

**Piper betle** L.
PIPERACEAE (Vettilai)
Leaves pounded with *Allium sativum* bulbs are applied on the affected parts of the skin.

**Polygala chinensis** L.
POLYGALACEAE (Siriyankankai)
Paste made from the leaves is applied on the infected area for psoriasis.

**Pongamia pinnata** (L.) Pierre.
PAPILIONACEAE (Punkumaram)
Bark and paste, boiled in gingili oil is applied on the swollen parts to cure rash and leprosy.

**Rotula aquatica** Lour.
EHRETIACEAE (Chepunerungi)
Paste from the entire plant is a good antidote for skin diseases.
Smilax zeylanica L.
SMILACACEAE (Kalthamaraik)

Decoction from the root is used for psoriasis and dermatitis.

Terminalia chebula Retz.
COMBRETACEAE (Kadukkai)

Juice obtained from the seed is used as an excellent remedy for microbial infection.

Wrightia tinctoria R.Br.
APOCYNACEAE (Veppaalai)

Paste made from the bark and seed is applied for psoriasis.

The entire plant, fruits, stem, root, bark, seed, flower and latex also contribute excellent remedy for skin diseases. There are four methods of preparation namely, paste (54%) and powder made from dried plant parts (20%), decoction (15%), juice extracted from the fresh plant parts (10%) and essential oil (1%). External applications and internal consumption of the herbal drugs were advocated in the treatment of skin diseases. It was observed that, most of the remedies consisted of single medicinal plant and few were mixtures of two or three different medicinal plants. Many of the plants listed here for the treatment of skin diseases have been reported by earlier researchers. (Prashantkumar et al., 2006; Kingston et al., 2009; Sharma et al., 2003; Chelliah et al., 2006 and Rosakutty et al., 1999). Among the 30 plant species, 4 plants namely Calotropis gigantea, Centella asiatica, Indigofera aspalathoides, and Pongamia pinnata are used as remedy for leprosy and four plants namely Aloe vera, Acorus calamus, Azadirachta indica and Ocimum tenuiflorum are used to cure eczema and three plant species namely Aloe vera, Smilax zeylanica and Wrightia tinctoria are used for treating psoriasis. These taxa listed above were repeatedly used and prescribed by the traditional healers. The following plants are found to be used by the healers more in Kanyakumari district compared to other parts in Tamil Nadu. They include Acalypa indica, Andrographis paniculata, Aristolochia bracteata, Cardiospermum halicacabum, Centella asiatica, Hemidesmus indicus, Mimosa pudica, Polygala chinensis and Rotula aquatica.

Conclusion

The present study includes information on 30 taxa belonging to 25 genera and 22 families which are used very commonly as remedies for skin diseases. The study makes an invaluable contribution to the existing knowledge of folk remedies that are in current practices for the treatment of skin diseases. Once the efficacy of these herbal drugs in treating skin diseases is scientifically established, the popularization of these remedies can be recommended in Indian Health Care System for wider application as these plants are well within the reach of rural masses. This type of herbal uses helps the people to live in harmony with the nature besides adding years to their life. The examination of herbal medicine used by the tribal and native people may provide an excellent opportunity for discovering new drugs by the researchers leading to better health and long life span.
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