Significant characteristics of traditional medicine in Sri Lanka: a review based on sources of available evidence

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Abstract

Traditional medicine in Sri Lanka dates back over a period of 3000 years and expanded with the influence of Ayurveda and traditional culture of the country. The objective of this study was to review the significant characteristics of traditional medicine in Sri Lanka on the basis of archeological evidence, inscriptions, ola leaves transcripts and traditional authentic texts such as Yogarnavaya, Varayogasaraya, Bhesajjamanjusa etc. The basic concept of dedicated hospitals for human beings was established in Sri Lanka, a fact justified by the archeological evidence of the Mihintale hospital which is believed to be the first hospital in the world. There is evidence form a number of inscriptions that traditional medicine received royal patronage and Maha Wedanā (medical superintendent) and Sulu Wedanā (medical officer) were appointed by the king to develop the traditional medicine and the significant treatment method Pūdawedakama (treating the patients by using leech) was practiced. Sri Lankan traditional medicine is composed of a number of disciplines of which Ürdhvajatrugata Roga receives considerable significance.

Endemic plants have been extensively used to treat diseases in the Ürdhvajatrugata Roga; Goda Manel (Crinum latifolium), Kapparawalliya (Anisochilus carnosus) and Kabarossa (Similax zeylanica) have been widely used. Apart from the native plants, minerals (Walankatu, Yabora) and animal parts (Kabbellapotu) have been used for preparation of drugs to treat abscesses in the Ürdhvajatrugata Roga. Another significant feature is that most of the typical practices have been recorded in Ola leaves scripts which have been preserved in the University of Kelaniya and in some personal collections. According to those formulae, Pathmana is a special kind of cūrṇa in traditional medicine that consists of China Ala (Smilax glabra Roxb.) as the main ingredient recommended to treat Ürdhvajatrugata Roga. These findings describe the significant characteristic features of traditional medicine in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Traditional medicine in Sri Lanka, Ürdhvajatrugata Roga, endemic plants
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