

CAMI: Fighting HIV/AIDS, Malaria With Herbs

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According to the United Nations Agency for International Development (UNAID) report, there are over 34 million people living with HIV/AIDS across the world. Out of this number, Sub-Saharan Africa is home to 80 per cent. In 2006, there were 4.3 million new HIV infections with over 40 per cent among young people aged 15-24.

Complementary and Alternative Medicine Initiative Inc., a non-governmental organisation (NGO) was formed by Dr. Uchenna Egwuonwu, a specialist on Oriental Medicine with the mission to improve the health and wellbeing of people through treatment, research, education, and programme development that focuses on the integration of evidence-based traditional medicine.

Faced with the tragic suffering of those afflicted with the virus, the lack of access to information about HIV/AIDS in rural areas, and the absence of adequate governmental health care programmes, Dr Egwuonwu decided to take a stronger course of action by initiating the development of Complementary and Alternative Medicine Initiative (CAMI).

She is now using it to direct the focus of her life's work to Africa and the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Her immediate goals are to develop a clinic in Nigeria where evidence-based traditional medicine is offered, continue the research, cultivation and promotion of medicinal plants in Nigeria and, most importantly, make sure that donations get to where they are needed. She is a lecturer in Pharmacognosy Department of the University of Maiduguri, Borno State.

She left Nigeria for the United States at the age of nine and resided there for many years while completing her education. She received her Doctorate degree in Traditional Chinese medicine from the Pacific College in San Diego California, USA with seven years of study during which she treated HIV/AIDS patients at the University of San Diego California for two years and was the first doctor of Oriental medicine to be based as staff.

In December 2005, Egwuonwu, as a doctoral student at the Pacific College of Oriental medicine (PCOM), travelled to Nigeria to conduct a study on the treatment of HIV/AIDS with phyto-chemicals extracted from medicinal plants.

In the five months that she spent in Nigeria, her mission to become more active in battling this epidemic grew as she became increasingly



•Egwuonwu

Nigeria and in Onitsha, Anambra State.

According to Dr. Egwuonwu, "in treating HIV/AIDS, CD4 values and viral loads are routinely monitored for indication to begin drug therapy. Research has shown that specific medicinal plants boost the immune system and can prolong the time between diagnosis and the initiation of anti-retroviral therapy (ARV). Boosting the immune system with Traditional Medicine until ARV is indicated reduces cost and increases ARV options in a disease condition where medication resistance frequently occurs. This is especially important in sub-Saharan Africa where only one in five people needing ARV actually receive it.

"In 2002, the World Health Organisation (WHO) issued its first comprehensive guidelines to help countries incorporate safe and effective traditional medicine into primary health-care systems. CAMI is working to address the need for integration by helping individuals and communities to cultivate evidence-based, research supported medicinal

The Doctor of Oriental Medicine noted, "I have a charity registered in the US which means that all donations, funds to the initiative would be used here in Nigeria. I did my clinical study here in Nigeria and what I saw opened my eyes on the needs of the people and fortified my resolve to come home and contribute my quota to eradicating the disease with my talents and education.

"What I intend to do is use my skills to use medicinal plants and make it in such a way that it is injectable and then you put it in Acupuncture points. And in the clinical trials that I did during my study, it was observed that the CD4 of some of HIV/AIDS victims doubled. CD4 actually means the level of the patient's viral load and if a patient's CD 4 is below 200, then they would prescribe anti-viral medication for the patient. CD 4 reflects how the immune systems are doing, so if the CD4 is already dropped, then it means the immune system is dropping and that is when they begin to issue anti-viral medication," she added.

Continuing, she said: "during my clinical trial, I had a group of 30 people. It was my thesis, although it was a small study but overall it was a very good result as people's immune systems were boosted tremendously and they improved.

"It was a very short study, not like a year, two years; but the people definitely got improved. Such studies cost a lot of money for longer studies, but there are many plants that are available here that boost the immune systems, if you do research on this, you would find the plant, it is out there.

"So CAMI intends to carry out the research and implement it, and bring the information to the people. We are going to show them how to use the plants; plant it and other uses of the plants. On the choice of Nigeria, it is my home. It is the easiest place I can come and do such a project. I speak Igbo, though not fluently; but enough to get by and I have family here. So to me, it is all about sacrifice. I could be in America right now, have a clinic of my own, make my dollars, but that is not what I am here for. That is not the reason why God put me on this earth and kept me alive," she declared.

Going down memory lane, Egwuonwu recalled: "When I was in my 20s in my mum's house in the States, I was thinking about becoming a western doctor. But on a particular day, I was at home and a voice woke me up and said something to me. It was like 'You must save the dying. You must learn to use the power of your networking'. And when I opened my eyes, there was nobody in the room.

leading to my life's mission, and I am sure that everything I am doing in Nigeria has everything to do with that voice".

On her expectations in the near future, Egwuonwu said, "In three years, I hope to start off my practice. I hope that in three years I would have raised enough money for my Acupuncture, for my teaching and to buy the land to begin to build the training institute. I want to teach acupuncture, Chinese traditional medicine and pre-maculture and how to use compost to plant those herbs.

"I don't know anybody in government. I am just like I came to Nigeria and this is what I want to do. So, I am still learning where to go. I hope that they are willing to assist. My source of inspiration is God. God's voice keeps me going even when I am in despair. I believe in God, but I just don't want to say that it was God talking to me. I am being humbled because He is awesome. I feel his presence around me. What I want to achieve is to see malaria under control".

Egwuonwu pointed out that she wants her people liberated from disease and empowered.

"I don't want them to remain enslaved, to these pharmaceutical companies that deal on malaria drugs. They can cure malaria on their own through herbs. In America, people are empowered to treat themselves, the drugs are there for those that want them; but there are options available. They still have the knowledge to help themselves and that is what I want to do.

On the acceptability of traditional medicine in the country she said the people need to wake up because there is the fear of it, and also a part that has scientific backing.

She said: "I am a doctor. I went to school for this. I studied this in school, which shows you that there is a part of traditional medicine that has a scientific base, which science is now catching up saying yes it is true this plant do this, just because it came out in herbs doesn't mean that it does not have value.

"I am going to University of Maiduguri to be part of the Pharmacognosy Department. It is a branch of medicine that uses plants to make drugs and treat diseases. They have laboratories. So we would be touching on different things. If you want to go into

Solar energy, you can bring the technology on that.

"They have kits. In the next three years, I would want to be working in my training centre in Abuja, I don't care what it is going to cost, but I have that implicit hope in God to provide.