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An ethnomedicinal survey of indigenous knowledge on medicinal plants in the traditional authority Chikowi in Zomba, Malawi

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Medicinal plants and ethnomedicinal studies continue playing a significant role in the discovery of pharmaceuticals, nutraceuticals and cosmeceuticals. Calls for ethnomedicinal studies have increased recently to unleash the potential in medicinal plants and document majorly verbal traditional knowledge. This study was aimed at recording the ethnomedicinal plants, parts and preparation methods used by traditional practitioners to manage diseases in the Traditional Authority Chikowi area of Zomba district in Malawi. This cross-sectional study was conducted for 2 weeks in September 2017. Semi-structured questionnaires were administered to traditional medicine practitioners using snowball sampling in the company of botany personnel from the National Herbarium and Botanical Gardens (NHBG). Data collected included plant local names, medicinal uses, parts used, preparation methods and administration methods to patients or clients. Some species were photographed and identified in the field by the NHBG officers. Five traditional practitioners (2 home-based and 3 market-based) were interviewed. Their age range was 39-66 years and they assisted 3-15 patients per day. Fifty-nine medicinal plant species belonging to 38 families were used as prophylaxis, treatment and in the management of 27 communicable and non-communicable diseases/conditions. Fabaceae family had the largest percentage of species (11.9%) followed by anacardiacea (6.8%) and euphorbiaceae (6.8%), asteraceae (5.1%) and papilionoideae (5.1%), while the rest constituted 3.4% and 1.7%. Majority (83.1%) of the species were indigenous, while 16.9% were exotic. Preparation methods included infusion (38.0%), powder (28.0%), tablets (24.0%), vapour (8.0%) and cream (2.0%). Of these, 86.0%, 12.0% and 2.0% were administered orally, topically and rectally respectively. Roots were the mostly used part (60.8%), followed by leaves (19.0%), barks (7.6%), fruits (3.8%), seeds (3.8%), whole plant (3.8%) and flowers (1.3%). Majority of the medicinal plants were trees (32.2%) and shrubs (32.2%), while 18.6%, 10.2%, 5.1% and 1.7% were herbs, vines, weeds and macrofungi respectively, of which 94.9% were wildly found. The area has rich biodiversity of medicinal plant species and knowledge scientists can use as baseline for identification of medicinal plants species and bioactive compounds or preparations with useful medicinal properties. However, indigenous knowledge and medicinal plants need protection to save them from the imminent extinction.

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