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## **Traditional Medicine and Cancer Care in Eastern Nigeria: Cultural Perceptions and Practices**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Cancer is a major health concern in Eastern Nigeria, where limited access to conventional healthcare and a strong reliance on traditional medicine shape the cancer care landscape. Despite increasing cancer incidences, traditional healing practices, including herbal remedies and spiritual healing, continue to play a significant role in the treatment of cancer. This review examines the cultural perceptions and practices surrounding traditional medicine and cancer care in Eastern Nigeria, with a focus on how these practices coexist with conventional treatments. It highlights the rich diversity of indigenous healing practices, such as the use of herbs like ginger, moringa, and scent leaf, as well as spiritual rituals aimed at restoring balance and health. The paper also explores the challenges in integrating traditional medicine with modern cancer care, including the lack of scientific validation, cultural skepticism from healthcare providers, and the absence of regulation in traditional healing. Despite these barriers, the potential for collaboration between traditional healers and modern medical practitioners is emphasized, advocating for a more holistic, culturally sensitive approach to cancer care that improves patient outcomes.

**Keywords:** Traditional Medicine, Cancer Care, Eastern Nigeria, Herbal Remedies, Spiritual Healing.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Cancer remains one of the leading causes of mortality worldwide, with increasing incidences across various regions, including Nigeria. In recent decades, cancer has become a growing public health issue in sub-Saharan Africa, especially in countries like Nigeria, where healthcare systems are often strained by limited resources, poor infrastructure, and inadequate access to medical care [1-4]. The situation is further exacerbated by a lack of awareness about cancer prevention, early detection, and treatment, leading to late diagnoses and high mortality rates. Despite the rising burden of cancer, many Nigerians, especially in rural and culturally rich regions like Eastern Nigeria, still rely heavily on traditional medicine for the treatment of diseases, including cancer [5-8].

In Eastern Nigeria, traditional healing practices are deeply rooted in the cultural fabric of the society, where many individuals continue to seek herbal remedies, spiritual healing, and other indigenous practices as alternatives or supplements to conventional medical treatments. The belief in the efficacy of traditional medicine is often influenced by cultural, social, and spiritual factors, with traditional healers being viewed as integral to community health systems [9-14]. The intersection of traditional medicine and cancer care in this region presents a complex landscape that requires thorough exploration, especially as the country faces the dual challenge of modernizing healthcare while preserving its cultural heritage [15-16]. This study aims to critically examine the role of traditional medicine in cancer care in Eastern Nigeria, focusing on cultural perceptions, practices, and the possible integration of traditional and conventional medical systems. By investigating the relationship between indigenous healing practices and cancer treatment, this study seeks to provide valuable insights into how both systems can coexist and complement each other in the Nigerian healthcare context [17-24].

Traditional medicine in Nigeria, particularly in the Eastern region, is characterized by a rich diversity of practices, ranging from the use of herbal medicines and therapeutic rituals to spiritual interventions. These practices have been passed down through generations and are often seen as more accessible, affordable, and culturally acceptable, especially in rural areas where conventional medical facilities are scarce [25-34]. In Eastern Nigeria, indigenous healers are highly regarded, and their practices are seen as a legitimate form of healthcare, often intertwined with the community's spiritual beliefs and customs. Cancer, however, is a complex disease that requires advanced

diagnostic tools, treatment options, and specialist care, which are often not readily available in many parts of Eastern Nigeria. The challenge of accessing high-quality cancer care, including chemotherapy, radiation therapy, and surgery, makes traditional medicine an attractive option for many individuals who seek alternative or complementary treatments [35-37]. The role of traditional medicine in cancer care in Nigeria is particularly critical, given the stigma surrounding cancer and the cultural perceptions of illness as being spiritually or morally charged, which may lead to a preference for non-medical treatments. Furthermore, traditional healers are often consulted when conventional medicine fails to provide adequate solutions or when patients experience adverse effects from medical treatments. Despite the widespread use of traditional medicine, there has been limited research on its specific role in cancer care [38-45]. While some studies have explored the use of herbal remedies for managing cancer symptoms, much remains unknown about the broader cultural and social dynamics that shape these practices. Additionally, the integration of traditional and conventional medical systems has not been fully explored, and there is a need for dialogue between traditional healers, healthcare providers, and policymakers to create a more comprehensive approach to cancer care in Nigeria [46-56].

In Eastern Nigeria, cancer care is predominantly provided by conventional medical practitioners, but many people still turn to traditional medicine as a complementary or alternative treatment. This reliance on traditional medicine raises important questions about its efficacy, safety, and potential interactions with conventional cancer treatments [10]. The challenge lies in understanding the extent to which traditional medicine is integrated into cancer care, the perceptions of both patients and healthcare providers towards these practices, and the possible risks associated with using herbal remedies and spiritual healing in cancer treatment. Moreover, there is a lack of structured communication and collaboration between traditional healers and modern medical professionals, which may lead to gaps in patient care and treatment outcomes [57-65]. This study addresses these gaps by investigating how traditional medicine is perceived and practiced in the context of cancer care in Eastern Nigeria, with the aim of fostering a more holistic understanding of the healthcare needs of cancer patients in this region. This study aims to explore the role of traditional medicine in cancer care in Eastern Nigeria, a region where such practices remain prevalent despite the growth of conventional medical treatments. The research objectives include assessing cultural perceptions surrounding cancer and its treatment, examining common traditional healing practices such as herbal remedies and spiritual healing, and identifying the challenges faced by patients who rely on these methods. Additionally, the study seeks to understand healthcare providers' attitudes towards integrating traditional medicine with conventional treatments and to recommend strategies for enhancing collaboration between the two systems to improve patient outcomes. The research questions focus on the cultural views of cancer in the region, how cancer patients perceive traditional treatments, the types of traditional remedies used, and the challenges healthcare professionals encounter in managing patients who use traditional medicine. The significance of this study lies in its potential to bridge the gap between traditional and modern cancer care. By understanding the cultural context and challenges faced by patients, the study can inform policies that promote collaboration between traditional healers and medical professionals, ultimately enhancing the quality of cancer care. It also offers valuable insights for healthcare planners in crafting inclusive, culturally sensitive policies that integrate indigenous knowledge with conventional practices, particularly in underserved areas.

#### **Cultural Context of Traditional Medicine in Eastern Nigeria**

Traditional medicine in Eastern Nigeria is deeply rooted in the cultural practices of indigenous communities, particularly among the Igbo and other ethnic groups. This medical system has evolved over centuries, passing down knowledge through generations about the therapeutic properties of plants, spiritual healing practices, and ritualistic approaches [66-73]. Herbal medicine plays a significant role, with local herbs such as *Carica papaya* (papaya), *Allium sativum* (garlic), and *Zingiber officinale* (ginger) commonly used to treat various ailments, including cancer. These plants are believed to possess both preventative and curative properties, often used in combination with other local remedies to enhance effectiveness. However, traditional medicine is not solely based on physical treatments; spiritual healing is also central to the practice. Many Eastern Nigerian communities view diseases, including cancer, as manifestations of spiritual imbalances, ancestral anger, or the influence of witchcraft. As such, healers often engage in practices like divination, prayer, and animal sacrifices to restore harmony between the physical and spiritual realms [74-79]. This holistic approach emphasizes the interconnectedness of body, mind, and spirit in health and healing, reflecting the unique way traditional medicine in Eastern Nigeria blends herbal, spiritual, and cultural elements in cancer care.

#### **Cultural Perceptions of Cancer and Traditional Medicine**

In Eastern Nigeria, cancer is often viewed through a lens that intertwines both physical and spiritual realms. Unlike Western perspectives that primarily focus on the biological origins of the disease, many people in this region see cancer as not just a medical condition but a spiritual or metaphysical affliction, often linked to ancestral curses, unresolved family conflicts, or spiritual forces [14]. This cultural interpretation profoundly influences treatment-seeking behavior. For many individuals, the first course of action is to approach traditional healers, who are believed

to possess the knowledge and power to address the root causes of cancer beyond the physical symptoms. Traditional medicine in Eastern Nigeria is thus seen as more than just a method for physical healing—it encompasses a holistic approach that includes the mind, body, and spirit in the healing process. Traditional healers are highly regarded within the community, often considered gatekeepers of ancestral knowledge and wisdom [15]. Their deep cultural trust has maintained a strong reliance on traditional treatments, even in the presence of modern medical options. Many cancer patients, dissatisfied with the side effects or perceived ineffectiveness of Western medical treatments like chemotherapy and radiation, turn to traditional remedies as a supplementary or alternative solution. This cultural context highlights the complex relationship between modern and traditional medical practices in the region.

### **Types of Traditional Treatments for Cancer**

In Eastern Nigeria, traditional treatments for cancer predominantly involve the use of herbal remedies, passed down through generations based on ancestral knowledge or personal experience. These remedies are often prepared as infusions, powders, or topical applications. Several plants are highly regarded for their perceived cancer-fighting properties. One such plant is Nigerian Scent Leaf (*Ocimum gratissimum*), commonly used in the treatment of stomach and colon cancers. Another widely utilized herb is Ginger (*Zingiber officinale*), known for its anti-inflammatory and anti-cancer properties, which is typically consumed as tea or applied topically [16]. Papaya leaves (*Carica papaya*) are also commonly used, especially in treating leukemia and breast cancer, based on their believed anti-cancer benefits. Moringa (*Moringa oleifera*), often called the "miracle tree," is valued for its rich nutrient content and potential in combating cancer. Beyond herbal treatments, traditional cancer care in the region includes practices such as bloodletting and massage therapy, which are believed to improve circulation and detoxify the body. Spiritual rituals aimed at cleansing both the body and mind are also integral to many cancer treatments [17]. These holistic approaches reflect a deep-rooted belief in the interconnectedness of physical, spiritual, and mental health in traditional Nigerian healing practices.

### **Challenges in Integrating Traditional and Modern Cancer Care**

Integrating traditional and modern cancer care in Eastern Nigeria presents several significant challenges. A major issue is the lack of scientific validation for many traditional remedies. While certain herbal treatments have demonstrated potential in preliminary studies, there is a dearth of comprehensive clinical trials to confirm their effectiveness and safety [18]. This gap in evidence raises concerns about possible harmful interactions between traditional remedies and conventional cancer treatments, potentially compromising patient outcomes. Another obstacle is the resistance of some modern healthcare professionals to acknowledge traditional medicine as a viable form of cancer care. This skepticism or even outright dismissal of traditional practices creates a divide between conventional medical practitioners and traditional healers, often resulting in poor cooperation and fragmented care for patients [19]. Many cancer patients may find themselves torn between two conflicting treatment approaches, making it difficult for them to make informed decisions. Additionally, the lack of regulation and standardization in the practice of traditional healing is a pressing concern. In Eastern Nigeria, there are no formal requirements for training or certification for traditional healers, meaning anyone can claim to possess the skills necessary for treatment. This lack of oversight leaves patients vulnerable to exploitation, as unqualified practitioners may provide ineffective or even harmful treatments, further complicating the integration of these healing systems.

### **Opportunities for Integration and Collaboration**

Integrating traditional and modern cancer care in Eastern Nigeria presents numerous challenges, primarily due to the lack of scientific validation for many traditional remedies. Although some herbal treatments have shown promise in preliminary studies, there is a significant gap in comprehensive clinical trials to establish their safety and efficacy. This absence of solid evidence leads to concerns about the potential for harmful interactions between traditional cancer treatments, which could adversely affect patient outcomes [20]. Furthermore, a prevailing challenge is the skepticism of some modern healthcare professionals towards traditional medicine, viewing it as unscientific or unreliable. This attitude fosters a divide between conventional medical practitioners and traditional healers, impeding collaboration and leading to fragmented care for cancer patients. As a result, patients may find themselves caught between two conflicting approaches, making it difficult to make well-informed decisions about their treatment options [21]. Compounding these issues is the lack of regulation and standardization in the practice of traditional healing. In Eastern Nigeria, traditional healers are not subject to formal training or certification requirements, leaving room for unqualified individuals to claim expertise. This lack of oversight increases the risk of exploitation, as untrained practitioners may offer ineffective or even harmful treatments, further complicating the integration of traditional and modern healthcare systems [22].

### **CONCLUSION**

In Eastern Nigeria, traditional medicine plays a crucial role in the cultural approach to cancer care, with many individuals relying on herbal remedies, spiritual practices, and cultural beliefs to manage the disease. These practices are deeply embedded in the local healthcare system and the daily lives of communities, often seen as an essential complement to conventional medicine. However, the integration of traditional medicine with modern cancer

treatments faces numerous challenges, including skepticism from the medical community and concerns about the safety and efficacy of some herbal remedies. Despite these challenges, there is growing recognition of the potential for collaboration between traditional healers and modern healthcare providers. This interdisciplinary approach could not only enhance cancer treatment but also address the physical, emotional, and cultural needs of patients. By combining the strengths of both systems, a more holistic model of care could emerge, improving patient outcomes and ensuring that treatment is both safe and culturally appropriate. Continued research and collaboration are key to unlocking these possibilities.

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