



Deforestation and the future of herbal medicine practice

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Dear Editor,

Plants and plant parts are frequently being used due to their medicinal properties, flavour or fragrance. The application of herbal medicines in the treatment/management of several diseases is as old as mankind. Nevertheless, majority of the world's population solely depends on herbal medicines for the treatment and/or management of health-related issues. Statistics have revealed that approximately four billion people worldwide rely on plants as source of therapy (1). This figure demonstrates that, herbal medicines have metamorphosed to a widely accepted therapy for diverse ailments.

Apart from being widely accepted, herbal medicines have also proven to be the bedrock of modern medicine. My research associates and I have previously published a paper to highlight the significance of herbal plants to new drug discovery (2). The use of herbal medicines in the future years appears to be in doubt, even though statistics have unveiled the wide acceptance of them. This is due to the threats currently being posed by deforestation. In fact, deforestation poses a clear threat to the future of herbal medicines, as statistics by the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) indicated that about 53 000 square miles of tropical forests each year during the 1980's were destroyed. This statistic has by far increased in recent years and led to the postulation that if nothing is done to arrest the current high deforestation rate; the world's rainforest may rapidly disappear (3).

A conservative estimate has recently disclosed that there are about 250 000 species of higher plants in the world, with only a relatively small proportion of them being currently used for medicinal purposes (4). However, it is uncertain how many of the medicinal plants will still be in existence in years to come. This is because quite a number of them may likely go into extinction,

majorly due to deforestation. The effect it may elicit to global health cannot be fathomed; as it will leave majority of the world's population (who can't access modern treatment) no other option than to live with their ailments. Seeing that herbal plants are a major source for new drug discovery, it will also significantly decrease the rate of new drug discovery and development.

In conclusion, the best way to preserve herbal medicine practice is for all (i.e., governments, researchers, economists, farmers etc) to initiate and support programs aimed at reducing deforestation to the barest minimum.

Conflict of interests

None.

Ethical considerations

Not applicable.

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