

STUDY INTO HIV TREATMENT

# Traditional medicine's big day

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**I**N A WORLD first, a clinical study to determine the effectiveness of traditional medicine in treating HIV-infected people will commence at Edendale Hospital in Pietermaritzburg next month, scientists announced at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) and Missouri University (MU) yesterday.

The nearly two-year study will investigate whether the medicinal plant, *Sutherlandia* – or *unwela* as it is known locally – will slow down the progression of the virus in 124 infected patients who do not medically qualify for ARV treatment in South Africa.

The study came to fruition after a 10-year collaboration between UWC and MU scientists, who formed the International Centre for Indigenous Phytotherapy Studies (TICIPS) in 2005. It is led by Douglas Wilson, Head of the Department of Medicine at Edendale Hospital, and MU professor Kathy Goggin, and funded by the United States National Centre for Complementary and

Alternative Medicine. TICIPS co-directors Quinton Johnson, of the UWC and SA Herbal Science and Medicine Institute, and Bill Folk at MU's school of medicine, said that it was the body's primary mission to conduct scientifically ethical and rigorous research on indigenous phytotherapies (plants, shrubs, floral extracts or essential oils) and their uses in combating HIV/Aids, TB and cancer.

The research was important as South Africa had more than 21 000 plant species, of which 3 000 were used medicinally, and 80% of its population consulted more than 200 000 traditional healers for their health-care needs, they said.

KZN Health MEC Peggy Nkonyeni yesterday lauded the efforts to explore the uses of traditional medicine.

She said she looked forward to the results of the study, as traditional medicine received much ridicule when it was suggested as being beneficial in the treatment of HIV/Aids.

The Medical Research Council (MRC), traditional healers and scientists at the

universities of KwaZulu-Natal and Cape Town have also contributed to the study.

"We used to be very sceptical of scientists and thought that all they wanted was to steal our knowledge, but now I see that our objective is the same – we want to see lives saved," said Doreen Buthelezi, a Pietermaritzburg traditional healer and provincial co-ordinator for traditional healers and the provincial department.

Traditional healers were invaluable in translating English questionnaires into isiZulu and telling the scientists how people expressed themselves when they felt unwell.

*Sutherlandia* was not a registered drug and did not need a prescription, which meant that traditional healers would continue administering it to HIV-positive patients if the study's hypothesis was correct.

MRC President Anthony Mbewu said it was "unfathomable" why some civil society groups had a problem with traditional medicines, which had a history stretching back more than 1 000 years.

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