

Medicinal Plants used for Postnatal Care in Malay Traditional Medicine in the Peninsular Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Malay traditional medicine practice concentrates on the primary healthcare including physical and spiritual aspects of human being. Most traditional practitioners use medicinal plants in the treatment. Hence, the study is aimed to compile preparations and local medicinal plants used traditionally by the women in postnatal care. Five Malay traditional practitioners based in the district of Muar in Johor and two in the district of Kuala Pilah in Negeri Sembilan were interviewed. From the study, information on 23 preparations, consisting of 128 medicinal plants, was successfully compiled. The preparations were categorised as jamu, fresh herbs, eye drop, poultice, medicated talcum powder and bathing solution. The medicinal plants comprised of 52 species belonging to 42 genera and 27 families. Some species were found to occur frequently, such as *Curcuma longa* L., *Zingiber officinale* Roscoe, *Cinnamomum zeylanicum* Blume, *Kaempferia galanga* L., *Piper cubeba* Bojer, *Zingiber cassumunar* Roxb., *Acorus calamus* L., *Piper nigrum* Beyr. ex Kunth, *Alyxia stellata* Roem. & Schult., *Coriandrum sativum* L., *Foeniculum vulgare* Mill., *Nigella sativa* L. and *Usnea barbata* Fries. The part of plants utilised in the preparations include rhizomes, fruits/berries, leaves, seeds, barks, flowers, roots, whole plant, gall and bulb. The study provided useful and important information on the diversity of medicinal plants used by different Malay traditional practitioners in postnatal care.

Key words: medicinal plants, postnatal care, Malay traditional medicine

INTRODUCTION

The practice of Malay traditional medicine has various influences, for example by the Indonesian, Chinese and Indian traditional medicines, *orang asli* medicine and including those introduced by the Arabs, Persians and Europeans.^[1] However, nowadays the practice is mainly dominated by the Arabic Unani medicine and Galenic philosophy. In the context of socioanthropology, structure of the Malay traditional medicine is not fixed and rigid, thus allowing improvements and changes to be made according to suitability and current needs.^[2]

The Malay traditional medicine system believes that a person consists of two aspects: (a) physical, that is the body; and

(b) spiritual.^[3,4] The physical characteristic of a person comprises of four elements (fire, earth, wind and water) and humours (damp, cold, dry and hot).^[5] Often a cold condition, due to either consuming “cold” foods and drinks or being in a cold weather, may result to the person building up excessive wind within the body and consequently this will cause the immediate or precipitating illness.^[6] The spiritual aspect, on the other hand, constitutes of the mind and soul substance or vital force (*semangat*); thus a person with a loss of *semangat* is said to be vulnerable to the influence of supernatural or evil spirits.^[3] The cause of an ailment is often thought to be due to the imbalance of the above mentioned physical elements and/or loss of *semangat*.

Various methods are used in the treatment of illnesses including use of herbal medicines such as spices, medicinal plants and animals; physical treatment such as massage, suction therapy and circumcision; as well as spiritual treatment such as recitation and performing prayers. Medication of physical illness is usually prescribed, of which characteristics must be opposite to those of the ailment.

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For example, a “cold” ailment or that caused by excessive wind in the body will be prescribed with a “hot” medicine. Medications containing single or compound medicinal plants may be dispensed in many forms such as powder, capsules, pills, “makjun”, medicated oil, simple distillate, decoction, infusion, paste and poultice. Herbal medicines are often used for medicinal purposes and are sometimes self-prescribed for relief of minor illnesses such as colds, fevers, coughs, diarrhea, stomach-aches and headaches. These are also more popularly taken as health supplements for the maintenance of physical fitness and health, restoration of new power and spirit of life, as well as reassuring matrimonial happiness.

In Malay traditional medicine, traditional midwife (*mak bidan*) is an important practitioner owing to her role in treating and advising women on health care and health problems. The fundamental function of a traditional midwife is taking care of a pregnant mother before, during and after childbirth. Frequently, women seek help from the traditional midwife when they have problems associated with the reproductive system. Treatment is often carried out by body massage with either ordinary cooking oil or medicated oil. Massage has been found to be beneficial for relaxation of the body, as well as for relieve of joint and muscle pain and stiffness. Sometimes a mixture of medicinal plants, commonly known as *jamu* (unprocessed or dried natural materials used for medicinal or health care purposes), is prescribed to the patient. *Jamu* is traditionally used for the relief of minor illnesses, as health supplements and food supplements, as well in cosmetics. Other preparations made by the traditional midwife include *air selusub* (medicine for before and during childbirth), *ubat periuk* (medicine for after childbirth), *makjun* (spherical semi-solid preparation), *bedak sejuk* (rice talcum powder), *param* (medicated talcum paste), liniment and hot compression.^[1] Most Malay communities believe that special attention and care should be given to a new mother during her confinement period in order to help restore energy and vitality. *Jamu* is usually given in the morning, followed by body massage for at least three consecutive days. Later, hot compression using a wrapped hot stone is applied onto the abdominal part. A medicated paste is then spread over the stomach and the waist is bound tightly with a long piece of cloth. Additionally, a medicated paste may be applied onto the forehead and face.

Proper documentation of the use of plants in the Malay traditional medicine practice is very limited, such as publications by Ridley,^[7] Gimlette,^[8,9] Gimlette and Burkill,^[10] Gimlette and Thomson,^[11] and Burkill,^[12] and these are not regularly updated. No formal training of traditional Malay practitioners is currently available. Knowledge and traditional prescriptions are passed from generation to generation merely by word of mouth. Thus, this paper provides

preliminary information on plants used traditionally by the women in postnatal care in Malaysia and possible justifications based on previously published traditional uses and scientific data for selected medicinal plants. The objective of the study is to compile information on the type and purpose of preparations, as well as the type and part of medicinal plants. This was done by oral interview of randomly selected Malay traditional medicine practitioners who are based in the districts of Muar in Johor and Kuala Pilah in Negeri Sembilan, in the Peninsular Malaysia.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Seven Malay traditional medicine practitioners were individually interviewed based on a set of pre-piloted questionnaire. Five of them were based in Muar, Johor and two were in Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan (Figure 1). The practitioners were Hussain, Kalsom, Painah and Salmi from Kampung Parit Medan, Muar, Johor. Zainab was from Kampung Tiong Baru, Muar, Johor. Yah and Ujang were from Kampung Tanjung Jati, Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan.

Information enquired in the questionnaire include: (i) type of preparation, (ii) name of medicinal plant(s), (iii) part of the medicinal plant used, (iv) method of preparation and (v) use of the preparation. The data gathered from the interview was analysed. Most of the names of medicinal plants were given in Malay, therefore, the scientific names were cross-checked with several ethnobotanical references such as Burkill,^[13] Zakaria and Mohd,^[1] and Mat-Salleh and Latiff.^[14] The reported traditional uses of these plants in Malaysia by Burkill^[13] were also obtained from Dr. Duke's Phytochemical and Ethnobotanical Databases.^[15]

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Preparations Used for Postnatal Care in Malay Traditional Medicine

Twenty three preparations consisting of 128 medicinal plants were compiled, as summarised in Table 1. The types of preparations included *jamu*, *ulam* (fresh herb), eye drops, *tapel* (poultice), *pilis* (medicated talcum paste applied onto the forehead), *param* (medicated talcum paste applied to the whole body) and *mandian* (herbal bath).

In the Malay traditional medicine, *jamu* is traditionally used in post-partum medication to help improve blood flow, warming and refreshing of the body, speed up contraction of the uterus and tightening of the vagina, encourage bowel movement and prevent vaginal discharge. *Jamu* often contains a mixture of various medicinal plants and plant parts that is evidenced from this study (Table 1: J1-J8). It is given orally in a form of either herbal pills or hot water

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