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Beliefs and practices regarding herbal plants used in self care among persons in Raththanapitiya area and the university community

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Objective: To list the herbal plants used in self care and describe the perception of beneficial effects experienced by the study population.

Method: Six focus group discussions were held. Each group comprised of eight members of similar age, both sexes and similar backgrounds. Four were university student groups from different parts of the country, one from staff members and another from Family Practice Centre patients. Ethical clearance was obtained from faculty committee.

Results: The participants frequently use herbal remedies for diabetes mellitus, urinary problems, skin diseases, coughs, eye conditions and abdominal conditions.

Following were used often and by the majority. Names as given in Sinhala are; wal koththamalli, kothalahimbutu, madatiya, sepalika, kowakka, thebu, ginithilla, karawila and nidikumba as remedies for diabetes mellitus; akkapanana, polpala, neeramulliya, rabu and ranawara for urinary problems; kohomba, nidikumba, lunuwila and nelli for skin diseases; koththamalli, yaki naran, ambul dodan, batu and adathoda for coughs and delum, pichcha and sepalika for eye conditions; beli, kohila eramudu and dehi for abdominal conditions.

All parts of a plant (leaves, fruits, roots, flowers and bark) are used. Methods of preparation have a wide variation and unique to the condition. Boiling with water, crushing, preparing 'melluma' or consuming the raw product are some of the methods often used. Nearly all remedies were perceived as effective. Side effects were attributed to use in large quantities.

Conclusion: Herbal plants are used widely by the study population irrespective of social or educational background. Participants perceived beneficial effects when herbs were used in moderation.