A Social Approach to the Validation of Traditional Veterinary Remedies – The Anthra Project

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ABSTRACT

Anthra, an organization of women veterinary scientists working in the field of livestock production and development, has been involved since 1996 in a research project to document and validate local ethnoveterinary and animal management practices carried out by livestock-rearing communities in different parts of the states of Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra in India. Communal knowledge and innovation are an integral part of the day-to-day healing and management practices of farmers in all areas and over 80% of farmers continue to use these because they are easily and quickly available, especially in remote villages. However, this knowledge is today rapidly being lost. Farmers, both men and women, have expressed a keen desire to increase their own knowledge of these systems. This paper outlines the validation framework evolved by Anthra, wherein farmers using these medicines are actively participating in an evaluation process. Major findings are that local practices are effective, participating farmers use them confidently and other farmers are keen to use and increase their knowledge of them.

Keywords: ethnoveterinary, epidemiology, participatory rural appraisal, phytotherapy, prevalence, sociology, treatment, validation

Abbreviations: AHW, animal health worker; CBO, community-based organization; GPP, Gokul Prakalp Prathishtan; NGO, non-governmental organization; VCDA, Village Community Development Association

INTRODUCTION

Many livestock farmers in rural India, especially those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, continue to use many ethnoveterinary practices because they have little or no access to modern veterinary medicine or care. Hospitals are distant, veterinarians are few and treatment costs are prohibitively expensive and often not available when needed. As the economic survival of these families is dependent on the livestock they own, validated ethnoveterinary knowledge assumes great importance. The overall objective of a project developed by Anthra, an organization of women veterinary scientists, was to understand and validate indigenous ethnoveterinary health care and animal rearing practices, with a view to developing a protocol that would
enable the integration and synthesis of the best and most useful elements of the indigenous and modern systems, so as to develop sustainable, culturally acceptable and economically viable livestock production. The immediate goal was to develop a protocol for the validation of ethnoveterinary treatments.

THE NEED FOR VALIDATION

Reasons for attempting to validate ethnoveterinary medicine mentioned by Fielding (1999) include confirmation of the efficacy or otherwise of the practices so that they can be encouraged, or conversely discouraged, among users; recommendations for integration of ethnoveterinary medicine with mainstream veterinary medicine; and increasing knowledge of ethnoveterinary medicine and its wider applications.

In the context ofAnthra’s work with communities, the impetus to study ethnoveterinary medicine came particularly from women farmers, who have historically been denied access to many aspects of this body of knowledge, since practices have been primarily transmitted from father to sons and only rarely to daughters. They wished to know remedies that are easy to prepare, effective, readily available and inexpensive, and that can be used confidently. They also wanted to learn to recognize conditions that cannot be treated with local remedies but need other kinds of management.

Thus, there was a clear need to screen the large range of such treatments, to define a useful ‘best package of practices’ and develop clear guidelines that farmers in each area could use.

The steps required may be summarized as follows:

1. Develop region-specific baskets of ‘best package of practices’ for farmers.
2. Increase the credibility of ethnoveterinary practices amongst the wider scientific community.

Additionally the following might be achieved through this project:

1. Protection and promotion of the biodiversity of valuable herbal medicines and plants through community herbal nurseries and gardens.
2. Dissemination of information back to the communities, especially to women, through training and capacity building, healer forums, visual media, etc.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research was carried out in collaboration with local partner organizations, including NGOs (non-governmental organizations) and CBOs (community-based organizations), in six distinct agroecological zones in Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra states, India, as summarized in Table I. Men and women from the community were trained by Anthra as Animal Health Workers (AHWs) and “community researchers” to document the knowledge from their communities and subsequently participate in the validation.