

INVESTIGATION

Health alarm as Kenyans troop to bogus

Drug regulator warns alternative medicine clinic near you may deliver a dose of poison

By DANIEL WESANGULA

Thousands of sick and desperate Kenyans are losing money every day in deadly scams operated by self-styled herbal clinicians.

In the get-rich-quick schemes, the unscrupulous business people exploit widespread fear, ignorance and poverty as well as regulatory weaknesses to make money by prescribing what they claim are “healthy and natural” cures for all manner of illnesses, including the ones that have defied modern medicine like HIV/Aids, cancer, diabetes and asthma.

Their activities also border on witchcraft, and their list of cures is bizarre, as some of the “herbalists” also claim to have remedies for impotence and non-medical problems like bad luck.

“It is estimated that the alternative medicine sector in the country is worth more than Sh20 billion, and everyone is out to get a slice of it,” said Willis Wanjala of Makini Herbal Clinic whose practice is widely considered to be fairly credible by virtue of the open manner in which it appears to operate.

Sunday Nation investigations confirmed recent reports that the con artists in some cases buy actual drugs, repackage them as herbal products, and sell them at much higher prices to unsuspecting patients.

The scam has caused alarm in government and touched off a media campaign to advise the public against rushing to every herbalist around the corner for health solutions.

Last week, the Pharmacy and Poisons

20 bn

The amount in shillings a herbal medicine practitioner says the sector is worth

Board put out an advertisement in local dailies alerting the public to dangerous drugs marketed as herbal contraceptives that are circulating in the market.

“(The Board) is drawn to cases where unscrupulous people purporting to sell herbal medicinal products are indeed dispensing unauthorised and unregistered conventional medicines through ‘herbal/Chinese clinics,’” said the board in the advert.

The board singled out a Chinese-branded contraceptive and warned that its side-effects are life-threatening both for mothers and children.

It also raised a red flag on the activities of some of the people who claim in their advertising, especially in the vernacular media, to have the power to cleanse the body and blood of toxic substances.

“What many of these herbalists sell are nutritional supplements, not drugs. For their products to be qualified as drugs, numerous clinical tests will need to be conducted,” Mr Wanjala said.

“We need to have a central body to regulate the alternative health practitioners. Some of the people calling themselves herbalists might be termed witch doctors, thus defrauding Kenyans. No one with a background in medicine would claim to have an untested cure for HIV/Aids.”

Speaking to the *Sunday Nation*, Medical



Services Permanent Secretary Prof James ole Kiyapi said the ministry planned to register genuine practitioners, document herbal products and integrate them into the domestic pharmaceutical industry.

“We are not saying that there is no room for them to practise. On the contrary, we understand the richness Kenya has in terms of medicinal plant products. All we want to do is register the genuine practitioners and get rid of the fake ones,” he said. “Records will enable us to tap into their products and grow this indigenous industry into a larger domestic pharmaceutical industry.”

The Pharmacy and Poisons Board is mandated to improve and promote appropriate and safe pharmaceutical care in Kenya but can only warn the public. It cannot take any action against the “herbalists” allowed to operate under the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage.

James Njoroge of Almed Health Products, whose company was recently prohibited by the Pharmacy and Poisons Board from advertising its products, took issue with the decision, saying the board lacked the mandate to do so.

A signpost advertising the services of a herbalist outside a residential building in Nairobi. The list of ailments the herbalist claims to have solutions for include infertility, gonorrhea and relationships.
Photo/FILE

“The board is meant to regulate the marketing and manufacturing of products that have pharmaceutical properties in them. Unless they trace such properties in our products, they cannot regulate the industry,” said Mr Njoroge. But he admitted that there were “quacks among us” as in any other profession.

The Pharmaceutical Society of Kenya is of another opinion.

“If they claim to have products that have medicinal value they should be subjected to tests that will determine how their products work and ascertain if they work or not,” said Dr Titus Kahiga, the vice-chairman of the society.

According to the Pharmacy and Poisons Board, some products being paraded as healthy herbals are actually chemical compounds with serious side-effects that could cause loss of life.

More worrying is the fact that it is impossible to tell the difference between what some call genuine herbal products and the fake ones.

“This is where they get away with murder. No one investigates their products. Cases have been recorded in which some

of them mix proven and tested drugs with herbal concoctions, package them well and pass them off as herbal medicine,” said Dr Kahiga.

He said that in some instances, anti-retrovirals, the life-prolonging drugs prescribed to people living with HIV, and anti-malarial drugs are mixed with herbal products.

“Naturally, whenever a drug is ingested, it will have different effects on the body. The patient might feel better and think that the products he has been taking work. This is dangerous because the drugs are not administered to the required dosage,” said Dr Kahiga.

However, alternative health practitioners say there might be yet another twist to the current row between them and pharmaceutical bodies in the country.

“The image of herbal medicine has over the past few years been eroded as a result of these quacks and due to pressure from pharmaceutical bodies,” said Mr Njoroge of Almed products.

Mr Wanjala of Makini Herbs Clinic said some of this animosity comes as a result of politics. “Pharmaceutical companies