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THE STATUS OF TRADITIONAL MEDICINE IN SOUTH AFRICA

Incorporating Traditional Medicines into the Mainstream

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Interesting facts and figures

- ▶ South Africa has more than 200 000 Traditional Health Practitioners ("THPs") in a population of approximately 44 million
- ▶ There is a ratio of 1 THP per 220 persons. This ratio is higher than that of the rest of Africa, which is 1:500 while the ratio of medical practitioners to that of the population is estimated to be 1:40 000
- ▶ Approximately 30 million South Africans use traditional medicines while 4,5 million people living with HIV and AIDS use traditional medicines and consult THPs
- ▶ 24 000 indigenous plants have been documented, 12% of which are used for medicinal purposes.

The Traditional Health Practitioners Act No. 22 of 2007 ("the THP Act")

Purposes of the THP Act

- ▶ to establish an Interim Traditional Health Practitioners Council of South Africa;
- ▶ to provide for the registration, training and practices of traditional health practitioners;
- ▶ to serve and protect the interests of members of the public that use the services of traditional health practitioners.

The Traditional Health Practitioners Act No. 22 of 2007 ("the THP Act") Cont...

Definitions to be borne in mind:

- ▶ The term "traditional health practice" is defined as "the performance of a function, activity, process or service based on a traditional philosophy that includes the utilisation of traditional medicine or traditional practice and which has as its object the maintenance or restoration of physical or mental health or function; or the diagnosis, treatment or prevention of a physical or mental illness; or the rehabilitation of a person to enable that person to resume normal functioning within the family or community; or the physical or mental preparation of an individual for puberty, adulthood, pregnancy, child birth or death".
- ▶ The term "traditional philosophy" is defined as: "indigenous African techniques, principles, theories, ideologies, beliefs, opinions and customs and uses of traditional medicines communicated from ancestors to descendants or from generations to generations, with or without written documentation, whether supported by science or not, and which are generally used in traditional health practice".
- ▶ "Traditional medicine" is defined as: "an object or substance used in traditional health practice for the diagnosis, treatment or prevention of a physical or mental illness or any curative or therapeutic purpose, including the maintenance or restoration of physical or mental health or well-being in human beings".
- ▶ A "traditional health practitioner" is defined as "a person registered under this [THP Act] in one or more of the categories of traditional health practitioners".

The establishment of the Interim Traditional Health Practitioners Council of South Africa ("the Council")

Some of the objects of the Council are to:

- ▶ promote public health awareness;
- ▶ ensure the quality of health services within the traditional health practice;
- ▶ protect and serve the interests of members of the public that use or are affected by the services of traditional health practitioners;
- ▶ promote and maintain appropriate ethical and professional standards required from traditional health practitioners;
- ▶ promote and develop interest in traditional health practice by encouraging research, education and training;
- ▶ ensure that traditional health practice complies with universally accepted health care norms and values.

The establishment of the Interim Traditional Health Practitioners Council of South Africa ("the Council")

Some important functions of the Council:

- ▶ the Council may make enquires and conduct investigations into complaints and allegations concerning the conduct of registered traditional health practitioners;
- ▶ the Council may issue guidelines concerning traditional health practice;
- ▶ the Council may make rules on matters necessary or expedient for the proper implementation of the THP Act;
- ▶ In terms of Section 19 of the THP Act, the Registrar of the Council, must perform functions assigned to him or her in terms of the THP Act and must keep registers in which she or he enters the names of traditional health practitioners and students.
- ▶ Section 21 of the THP Act provides that no person may practise as a traditional health practitioner within the Republic of South Africa unless he or she is registered in terms of the THP Act.

Where to from now henceforth? Some interesting questions that may arise from the promulgation of THP Act

- ▶ Are private medical funders now obliged to fund traditional health practices?
- ▶ Are traditional health practitioners recognised by employers, in the context of providing sick notes to employees absent from work, for reasons related to a diagnosis made by a THP?
- ▶ Are there sufficient financial resources to monitor the number of persons that are born or die under the care of THPs?
- ▶ Are there mechanisms in place to monitor those persons that receive care of THPs, whilst, at the same time, under the care of medical practitioners registered in terms of the Health Professions Act and related legislation?
- ▶ How, practically, will traditional medicine philosophy be harmonised into the broader national health sector?
- ▶ Have private medical schemes, medical research companies and general healthcare practitioners "bought in" into the concept of traditional medicine and traditional philosophy?

Introduction: The Role of Traditional Healers

- ▶ Traditional healers play a crucial and influential role in providing health care to the majority of the South African population.
- ▶ Traditional healers are usually the first health care providers to be consulted, especially in rural areas and are deeply interwoven into the fabric of cultural and spiritual life.
- ▶ It is for these reasons that the legislature thought it prudent to recognise traditional medicine practices in South Africa.
- ▶ It would amount to serious oversight not to incorporate traditional medicine into the comprehensive health care national strategy.
- ▶ The National Drug Policy, championed by the Department of Health has as its aims the following:
 - investigating the use of effective and safe traditional medicine in so far as efficacy, safety and quality is concerned;
 - registering and controlling marketed traditional medicines.