

REVIEW

TRADITIONAL BHUTANESE MEDICINE (*gSo-ba Rig-pa*): AN INTEGRATED PART OF THE FORMAL HEALTH CARE SERVICES

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Abstract. Traditional medicine in Bhutan is known as *gSo-ba Rig-pa* and is one of the oldest surviving medical traditions in the world. Other medical systems, such as Chinese medicine, Indian Ayurvedic medicine, Unani medicine, Greco-Roman medicine and the country's rich cultures and traditions have greatly influenced the way traditional Bhutanese medicine evolved. However, Buddhist philosophy remains the mainstream of this medical system. *gSo-ba Rig-pa*'s principles are based on the perception the human body is composed of three main elements: *rLung* ('Air'), *mKhris-pa* ('Bile') and *Bad-kan* ('Phlegm'). When these three elements are balanced in the body a person is said to be healthy. The pathophysiology is also different from other medical systems, and the close link to Buddhism is reflected in the spiritual dimensions and the perception that all suffering is caused by ignorance. The treatment of diseases includes behavioral modification, physiotherapy, herbal medicines, minor surgery and spiritual healing. This makes the traditional Bhutanese medicine a unique and holistic health care system. The traditional medicine is an integrated and recognized part of the formal health care services in Bhutan under the auspices of the Ministry of Health. The article highlights three main points which can be learned from the Bhutanese experience: 1) the strong tradition of herbal medicines within *gSo-ba Rig-pa* forms a unique opportunity to prospect for new leads for development of pharmaceuticals, 2) the availability of the traditional medicine along with biomedicine broadens the health care choices for patients, and 3) the experiences of integrating two conceptually very different health care systems within one ministry contains important managerial lessons to be learned.