

Taking Traditional Medicine (*Sowa Rigpa*) research from Bhutan to the world



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Sowa Rigpa, known as Traditional Medicine, is a form of healing that is widely sought after by people in Bhutan and beyond. While *Sowa Rigpa* has been practised in Bhutan for many centuries, it was integrated into the healthcare system in the year 1968 with the opening of the first Traditional Medicine Clinic at Dechencholing, under the vision of His Majesty the Third Druk Gyalpo, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck [1]. Due to its growing demand, a bigger National Indigenous Hospital was established at Kawang Jangsa in 1979 [1].

The first batch of locally trained Traditional Medicine Physicians graduated from the Institute of Traditional Medicine in 1984. The school was upgraded to the National Institute of Traditional Medicine in 1988. The institute was placed under the Royal University of Bhutan in 1999 and it governed the National Indigenous Hospital and the Pharmaceutical Research Unit that led the research and pharmaceutical manufacturing [1]. With the establishment of the Khesar Gyalpo University of Medical Sciences of Bhutan in 2012, the teaching institute was renamed

the Faculty of Traditional Medicine and the National Traditional Medicine Hospital was handed over to the Ministry of Health. Currently, the Faculty of Traditional Medicine offers eight courses which include MD, MSc, BSc and diploma programs, and has 86 students.

Sowa Rigpa services are accessible to the population in Bhutan across all 20 districts where Traditional Medicine Units are co-located with allopathic medicine hospitals [2]. Article 9 of the Constitution of Bhutan 2008 mandates that “The State shall provide free access to basic public health services in both modern and traditional medicines.” As of 2023, the Traditional Medicine sector catered to 106000 cases through 81 Traditional Medicine Units and the National Traditional Medicine Hospital, now administered by the National Medical Services [3]. Over the years, the Traditional Medicine sector in Bhutan has adopted international best practices in healthcare such as infection prevention and control, standard codes for disease classification, adoption of evidence-based practices, implementation of quality improvement initiatives, and the conduct of context-based *Sowa Rigpa* research. As a result, Traditional Medicine services have gained popularity among many people beyond the borders of Bhutan.

Over the past several decades, there has been a steady growth in the interest for research in Traditional Medicine, ranging from botanical identification of medicinal plants, geochemical analysis of minerals, efficacy of Traditional Medicine therapies to operational research in service delivery. The research outputs were published as monographs and research articles in international journals. In 2008, the *Men-jong So-rig Journal* was initiated by the National Institute of Traditional Medicine that pub-

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lished articles in English and Dzongkha, the national language of Bhutan. Over the years, it published a total of 48 articles over eight issues. However, it faced several challenges primarily related to the language barrier for Traditional Medicine Physicians whose education, training and practice are done in Dzongkha.

To connect readers from across the world to access Traditional Medicine research conducted in Bhutan, the Faculty of Traditional Medicine established the *Bhutan Sorig Journal* on 17 December 2023. It is a multidisciplinary journal with subject content in *Sowa Rigpa* (*Sorig* in short), the science of healing that is practiced not only in Bhutan but in many other countries in the region. In addition, the journal aims to promote active discourse on complementary and alternative medicine, traditional herbal formularies and other forms of healing medicine that are practiced across the globe demonstrating Bhutan's affirmative support to the World Health Organization's global strategy for Traditional Medicine [4]. While the journal is published in English to reach out to the global audience, it will accommodate articles in Dzongkha so that the journal serves as a medium of communication for all practitioners.

The journal has an editorial board that includes Traditional Medicine academicians and practitioners, allopathic doctors and international researchers with expertise in Traditional Medicine. This was a deliberate mix so that journal contents may be moderated through the lens of scientific validity but also to allow for original Traditional Medicine concepts to be tested through modern means. The journal also involves students from the University in editorial processes through customized mentoring processes aimed at mentoring future health researchers for Bhutan.

Bhutan Sorig Journal is the second peer-reviewed journal of the Khesar Gyalpo University of Medical Sciences of Bhutan, the only medical university in the country. The journal comes at a time when there is increasing recognition of the need to generate local evidence, not only for clinical practice but also for making policy decisions. Recently, the Ministry of Health and the University have collaborated in providing numerous health research capacity development initiatives including providing small research

grants. At the University, research is an integral component of both undergraduate and postgraduate academic requirements for students and for academic career progression for faculty members. Owing to the increasing number of research projects, the University established its institutional review board in 2021, the second ethics review board in the country.

The vision of *Bhutan Sorig Journal* is to serve as an archival and repository of research in Traditional Medicine not only in Bhutan but also in the South Asia region. As Bhutan was known as the Land of Medicinal Herbs owing to their abundance in our pristine mountains and low-lying plains, our special focus will be on the therapeutic discovery of herbs and natural minerals with potential pharmaceutical benefits. The journal will initiate active processes to document knowledge and skills that are in dying stages in the face of the onslaught of modern technology and information. The journal will provide a place to accommodate discussion and debate on all topics that will enlighten human minds with knowledge and their application to serve all sentient beings on earth.

In Buddhism, there needs to be a marriage of the right causes and conditions in what is known as dependent arising of events. There also needs to be a marriage of means and wisdom for endeavours to succeed. As is believed in the *tendrel*, the right alignment of the elements of the universe, we pray that this journal would serve as a place for the marriage of ancient wisdom with modern ideas, Asian knowledge with that of Western science and that of Bhutanese values with universal human values. It is our prayer that through this journal, Bhutan can share the knowledge, wisdom and values of Traditional Medicine to the world.

Declarations

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Not applicable

Consent for publication

Not applicable

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