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# THE POWER OF WORDS: SAVE

Saving traditional medicine

## SOCIAL CHANGES THREATEN TRADITIONAL HEALING

There was a time when the Tibetan system of medicine was practised throughout the Himalayas. Traditional doctors, called Amchis, provided their healing skills free of charge. In exchange, their fellow villagers took on their communal duties, such as ploughing, harvesting and the raising of livestock.

But the introduction of modern medicine and increased social mobility weakened this barter system and marginalised these traditional medical skills. With neither the indigenous nor the modern medical system to fall back on, the residents of Ladakh in India were suffering serious health consequences.

When Laurent Pordié – a young French anthropologist and ethno-pharmacologist – found out about this dilemma, he felt obliged to do something.

## ADAPTING THE PAST TO THE PRESENT

Pordié came up with the idea of augmenting the government-sponsored central medical system by reviving the traditional Tibetan medical skills.

He felt that this would not only improve healthcare in the region, but also help ensure the survival of the Ladakhi ethnic identity in the Indian states of Jammu and Kashmir which includes the district of Ladakh.

In 1998, he launched the “Traditional Medicine for Survival” programme. The goal is to educate individuals from *Amchi* families, and others, in this ancient system and to develop Amchi medical projects in alliance with the government. The practicality of his idea – balancing traditional skills with more conventional techniques to provide the best possible healthcare – and the enthusiastic reception that it has received from locals persuaded the Rolex Awards Selection Committee to support Pordié’s project.

## VARIETY OF INITIATIVES

Pordié publishes a bimonthly educational journal distributed not only to the 400 or so practising Amchis in the region, but also to the *Amchis* of the other Himalayan regions of India and to hundreds of Amchis in Nepal and Tibet. The aim is to bring them together in a professional network.

In addition, working with the highly respected Tibetan Medical and Astrological Institute of Dharamsala, from which he himself received a certificate in 1998, Pordié runs free 10-day and 15-day seminars. These are accessible to those with even the most basic level of schooling.

The final element of Pordié's initiative was the creation of medicine banks and health centres. Since it is no longer possible for the Amchis to gather all the medicinal plants needed, Pordié organised communal medicine banks where villagers can withdraw according to their needs. In exchange, they have the choice of paying or bartering goods and labour in the traditional way.



## EDUCATION LEADS TO IMPROVEMENT

Pordié's project has had considerable impact – both in terms of improving healthcare and preserving Tibetan medical practices in Ladakh. Amchis have filled the role of general practitioner for centuries and are as respected as monks and village elders. Their revival has been instrumental in re-establishing the cohesiveness and mental well-being of the communities that rely on them.

Today Pordié's "Traditional Medicine for Survival" programme is an autonomous Indian organisation. It has already trained more than 40 Amchis and dozens more are currently enrolled. Overall health in the region – although still below average – is showing signs of improvement for the first time.

The programme, now in its fifth year, is a complete success and is being used as a model by the government in neighbouring Nepal for its own similar initiative.