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PHARMACOLOGICAL EVALUATION OF HERBAL DRUGS FOR DIABETES

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ABSTRACT

Diabetes mellitus, a chronic metabolic disorder characterised by hyperglycemia, poses a major global health burden. Conventional antidiabetic medications, while effective, often carry undesirable side effects and limitations in long-term efficacy. This has spurred growing interest in herbal medicines as alternative or complementary therapies. This study provides a comprehensive pharmacological evaluation of selected herbal drugs traditionally used in diabetes management, including *Momordica charantia*, *Gymnema sylvestre*, *Trigonella foenum-graecum*, and *Cinnamomum verum*. The investigation focuses on their antihyperglycemic mechanisms, including insulin mimetic activity, β-cell regeneration, inhibition of carbohydrate-digesting enzymes, and antioxidant effects. Preclinical and clinical data are analysed to assess efficacy, safety, and pharmacodynamic properties. The findings support the potential of certain phytochemicals as effective adjuncts or leads for novel antidiabetic agents. However, more rigorous clinical trials and standardisation are needed to ensure the quality, safety, and efficacy of these herbal therapies.

KEYWORDS: Diabetes mellitus, Herbal medicine, Antihyperglycemic, Phytochemicals, *Momordica charantia*, *Gymnema sylvestre*, Insulin mimetic, β-cell regeneration, Traditional medicine, Pharmacological evaluation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Diabetes mellitus is a long-term metabolic disorder marked by elevated blood glucose levels due to inadequate insulin production, insulin resistance, or both. The condition has become a major global health concern, with its prevalence

rising rapidly across both developed and developing nations. If not properly managed, diabetes can lead to severe complications such as heart disease, kidney failure, nerve damage, and vision problems.[1]

While conventional antidiabetic medications like insulin and oral hypoglycemic agents are widely used, they are often associated with limitations such as side effects, high costs, and limited long-term effectiveness. As a result, many researchers and healthcare practitioners are turning their attention to alternative therapies, especially those derived from natural sources.

Herbal medicines have played a significant role in traditional healing systems for centuries. Many plants have shown promising antidiabetic properties, working through mechanisms like enhancing insulin secretion, reducing insulin resistance, protecting pancreatic beta cells, and inhibiting enzymes involved in carbohydrate digestion. These properties make them attractive candidates for developing safer and more affordable treatment options.[2]

This study aims to evaluate the pharmacological potential of selected medicinal plants used in traditional medicine for the management of diabetes. By analysing the bioactive components, therapeutic actions, and supporting scientific evidence of herbal drugs, this research aims to highlight their value as complementary or alternative treatments for diabetes.

1.1. Role of Herbal Drugs in Diabetes Management – Key Points

- **Traditional Use**
  - Herbal remedies have been used for centuries in systems like Ayurveda, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), and Unani for managing diabetes symptoms.
- **Alternative to Synthetic Drugs**
  - Herbal drugs are gaining popularity due to the side effects and high cost of conventional antidiabetic medications.[3]
- **Multiple Mechanisms of Action**
  - Increase insulin secretion from pancreatic β-cells.
  - Enhance insulin sensitivity in tissues.
  - Inhibit enzymes like α-glucosidase and α-amylase involved in carbohydrate digestion.
  - Reduce glucose absorption in the intestine.
  - Possess antioxidant and anti-inflammatory effects that protect pancreatic function.
- **Rich in Phytochemicals**
  - Active compounds include flavonoids, alkaloids, phenolics, saponins, and terpenoids — many of which show hypoglycemic activity.
- **Examples of Effective Herbal Drugs**
  - *Gymnema sylvestre* – known as “sugar destroyer,” promotes insulin secretion.
  - *Momordica charantia* (bitter melon) – mimics insulin and lowers blood sugar.
  - *Trigonella foenum-graecum* (fenugreek) – improves glucose tolerance.
  - *Cinnamomum verum* (true cinnamon) – enhances insulin sensitivity and glucose metabolism.
  - *Ocimum sanctum* (holy basil) – has blood sugar-lowering and antioxidant properties.[4]

- **Benefits of Herbal Drugs**
  - Lower toxicity and fewer side effects.
  - Suitable for long-term use.
  - Cost-effective and widely accessible, especially in low-resource settings.
- **Need for Scientific Validation**:
  - Standardization of herbal extracts is essential.
  - Clinical trials are needed to confirm efficacy and safety.
  - Quality control and regulation are necessary for broader medical acceptance.

1.2. Historical / Traditional Use of Herbal Drugs in Diabetes

- **Ayurveda**
  - Uses herbs like *Gudmar* (*Gymnema sylvestre*), *Karela* (*Momordica charantia*), and *Methi* (*Trigonella foenum-graecum*) for "Madhumeha" (diabetes).
  - Focuses on restoring metabolic balance through herbal formulations, diet, and lifestyle.[5]
- **Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM)**
  - Treats diabetes under the concept of "Xiaoke syndrome" (wasting-thirst disorder).
  - Utilizes herbs like *Astragalus membranaceus*, *Berberine*, and *Ginseng* for improving energy flow and glucose metabolism.
- **Unani Medicine**
  - Diabetes is known as "Ziabetus."
  - Herbs like *Jamun* (*Syzygium cumini*), *Halela* (*Terminalia chebula*), and *Neem* (*Azadirachta indica*) are commonly used.
  - Emphasis on detoxification and correction of humoral imbalances.

1.3. Advantages of Herbal Drugs in Diabetes Management

- **Affordability**
  - Generally less expensive than synthetic drugs, especially in developing regions.
- **Fewer Side Effects**
  - When used properly, herbal treatments often have lower toxicity and better tolerability.[6]
- **Multi-Target Actions**
  - Herbs can act on multiple pathways — for example, improving insulin sensitivity, reducing glucose absorption, and protecting pancreatic cells.
- **Cultural Acceptance**
  - Long history of traditional use builds trust in communities and promotes adherence.

1.4. Challenges in the Use of Herbal Drugs

- **Lack of Standardisation**
  - Variability in plant sources, preparation methods, and dosages can affect efficacy.
- **Quality Control Issues**
  - Risk of contamination, adulteration, and inconsistent active ingredient concentrations.[7]

- **Limited Scientific Validation**
  - Many herbal remedies lack large-scale clinical trials and robust pharmacological data.
  - Insufficient evidence for dosage, long-term safety, and drug-herb interactions.
- **Regulatory Gaps**
  - Herbal products often fall outside strict pharmaceutical regulations in many countries.

1.5. Mechanisms of Action of Antidiabetic Herbal Drugs

Herbal drugs used in diabetes management act through **multiple biochemical and physiological pathways**, often providing **synergistic and holistic effects**. Below are the key mechanisms through which these herbs exert antidiabetic activity:

1. Enhancement of Insulin Secretion

- Stimulate pancreatic β-cells to release more insulin.
- Help restore partially damaged or dysfunctional β-cells.
- Example herbs:
  - *Gymnema sylvestre*
  - *Momordica charantia*
  - *Tinospora cordifolia*

2. Improvement of Insulin Sensitivity

- Increase insulin receptor activity and glucose uptake in muscle and fat cells.
- Lower insulin resistance in peripheral tissues.[8]
- Example herbs:
  - *Trigonella foenum-graecum* (Fenugreek)
  - *Cinnamomum verum* (Cinnamon)
  - *Berberis aristata* (Berberine)

3. Inhibition of Carbohydrate-Digesting Enzymes

- Suppress α-amylase and α-glucosidase enzymes in the gut.
- Slow down carbohydrate digestion and glucose absorption.
- Helps prevent postprandial (after-meal) blood sugar spikes.[9]
- Example herbs:
  - *Salacia reticulata*
  - *Ocimum sanctum* (Holy Basil)
  - *Mangifera indica* (Mango leaves)

4. Antioxidant and Anti-inflammatory Effects

- Neutralise oxidative stress that damages pancreatic β-cells.
- Reduce inflammation associated with insulin resistance and diabetic complications.
- Example herbs:
  - *Curcuma longa* (Turmeric)

- *Allium sativum* (Garlic)
- *Camellia sinensis* (Green Tea)

5. Modulation of Glucose Transporters (GLUT)

- Upregulate glucose transporter proteins (e.g., GLUT-4) to facilitate cellular glucose uptake.
- Enhances glucose clearance from the blood.
- Example herbs:
- *Panax ginseng*
- *Pterocarpus marsupium.*[10]

6. Inhibition of Gluconeogenesis and Glycogenolysis

- Suppress liver enzymes involved in glucose production.
- Reduce hepatic (liver) glucose output.
- Example herbs:
- *Silybum marianum* (Milk Thistle)
- *Andrographis paniculata*

7. Promotion of Beta-cell Regeneration

- Some herbs support regeneration or protection of pancreatic β-cells.
- May help restore endogenous insulin production over time.
- Example herbs:
- *Gymnema sylvestre*
- *Momordica charantia.*[11]

2. PHARMACOLOGICAL EVALUATION METHODS OF ANTIDIABETIC HERBAL DRUGS

Evaluating the efficacy and safety of herbal drugs in diabetes management involves a combination of in vitro, in vivo, and clinical studies. These methods help determine the mechanism of action, therapeutic potential, and toxicity profile of the plant-based compounds.

2.1. In Vitro Methods (Laboratory-Based Cell or Enzyme Studies)

- **α-Amylase and α-Glucosidase Inhibition Assays**
- Assess the ability of extracts to inhibit enzymes that break down carbohydrates.
- Used to predict postprandial glucose-lowering potential.
- **Glucose Uptake Assays**
- Performed on cultured cells (e.g., 3T3-L1 adipocytes, L6 myotubes).
- Measures how well the herbal extract promotes glucose absorption by cells.
- **Insulin Secretion Assays**
- Conducted on isolated pancreatic β-cell lines (e.g., INS-1).
- Evaluate the extract's ability to stimulate insulin release.[12]
- **Antioxidant Activity Tests**
- Includes DPPH, ABTS, FRAP, etc.
- Measures free radical scavenging potential linked to β-cell protection.

2.2. In Vivo Methods (Animal Models of Diabetes)

- **Streptozotocin (STZ)-Induced Diabetes**
  - Commonly used to induce Type 1 or Type 2 diabetes in rodents.
  - Herbal drugs are evaluated for their ability to lower blood glucose levels.
- **Alloxan-Induced Diabetes**
  - Another model where pancreatic β-cells are selectively destroyed.
  - Used to test insulin-releasing or protective effects of plant extracts.[13]
- **Oral Glucose Tolerance Test (OGTT)**
  - Measures how efficiently the body clears glucose after oral administration.
  - Indicates the antihyperglycemic effect of the herbal formulation.
- **Biochemical Parameter Assessment**
  - Includes fasting blood glucose, HbA1c, lipid profile, liver/kidney markers.
  - Determines systemic effects of the herbal treatment.[14]
- **Histopathological Studies**
  - Examines tissue changes in the pancreas, liver, kidney under a microscope.
  - Helps assess protective or regenerative effects.

2.3. Clinical Evaluation (Human Trials)

- **Pilot and Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs)**
  - Conducted to assess efficacy and safety in diabetic patients.
  - Focus on outcomes like fasting glucose, postprandial glucose, HbA1c, insulin levels.
- **Tolerability and Adverse Effect Monitoring**
  - Records any side effects or toxic reactions during the study.
- **Standardisation and Dosing Studies**
  - Determine optimal therapeutic doses and duration of herbal interventions.[15]

2.4. Toxicological Evaluation

- **Acute and Sub-Chronic Toxicity Studies**
  - Conducted on animals to evaluate safety before human trials.
  - Includes observation of behaviour, weight, food intake, and organ health.
- **LD_{50} Determination**
  - Measures the lethal dose required to kill 50% of test animals.
  - Helps establish safety margins.

3. PHYTOCHEMICALS WITH ANTIDIABETIC ACTIVITY — DETAILED EXPLANATION

3.1. Flavonoids

- **Description**

Flavonoids are a large class of polyphenolic compounds widely distributed in fruits, vegetables, and medicinal plants. They have a common structure of two aromatic rings connected by a three-carbon bridge, forming a heterocyclic ring.

- **Antidiabetic Role**

Flavonoids act as antioxidants, scavenging free radicals that damage pancreatic β-cells and contribute to insulin resistance. They enhance glucose uptake by increasing the expression and translocation of glucose transporter type 4 (GLUT4) in muscle and adipose tissues, improving insulin sensitivity.[16]

- **Examples and Sources**
  - Quercetin (*Onion, apples*)
  - Kaempferol (*Kale, tea*)
  - Rutin (*Buckwheat, citrus fruits*)
  - Catechins (*Green tea*)

3.2. Alkaloids

- **Description**

Alkaloids are nitrogen-containing organic compounds, often with complex ring structures. Many are biologically active with effects on the nervous and endocrine systems.[17]

- **Antidiabetic Role**

Alkaloids can stimulate insulin secretion from pancreatic β-cells and improve glucose metabolism. Some also inhibit enzymes like α-glucosidase, reducing carbohydrate breakdown and glucose absorption from the gut.

- **Examples and Sources**
  - Berberine (*Berberis species*) — reduces insulin resistance and hepatic glucose production.
  - Vindoline (*Catharanthus roseus*) — stimulates insulin release.
  - Piperine (*Black pepper*) — improves glucose tolerance and enhances the bioavailability of other compounds.

3.3. Saponins

- **Description**

Saponins are glycosides with a soap-like foaming characteristic, consisting of a sugar moiety linked to a triterpenoid or steroid aglycone.

- **Antidiabetic Role**

Saponins promote insulin secretion and exhibit hypoglycemic effects by modulating glucose metabolism enzymes. Their antioxidant activity protects pancreatic cells, while they also improve lipid profiles by reducing cholesterol absorption.[18]

- **Examples and Sources**
  - Ginsenosides (*Panax ginseng*) — improve insulin sensitivity and reduce inflammation.
  - Diosgenin (*Fenugreek*) — stimulates insulin secretion and modulates glucose homeostasis.

3.4. Tannins

- **Description**

Tannins are polyphenolic compounds that bind and precipitate proteins. They are categorized as hydrolyzable or condensed tannins based on their structure.

- **Antidiabetic Role**

Tannins inhibit α-amylase and α-glucosidase enzymes in the digestive tract, slowing down carbohydrate digestion and glucose absorption, thus lowering postprandial blood sugar spikes. Their antioxidant properties protect against oxidative damage.[19]

- **Examples and Sources**
  - Ellagitannins (*Pomegranate*)
  - Proanthocyanidins (*Grape seeds, berries*)

3.5. Terpenoids

- **Description**

Terpenoids are a large group of naturally occurring organic chemicals derived from five-carbon isoprene units, often responsible for the aroma and color of plants.

- **Antidiabetic Role**

Terpenoids improve insulin sensitivity and regulate glucose metabolism by modulating signaling pathways like AMP-activated protein kinase (AMPK). They also reduce inflammation and oxidative stress linked to diabetes complications.

- **Examples and Sources**
  - Andrographolide (*Andrographis paniculata*) — enhances glucose uptake and insulin sensitivity.
  - Ursolic acid (*Apple peel, rosemary*) — reduces blood glucose and improves lipid metabolism.[20]

3.6. Phenolic Acids

- **Description**

Phenolic acids are a type of simple phenols, consisting of a phenolic ring and a carboxylic acid function.

- **Antidiabetic Role**

These compounds exhibit antioxidant effects that protect pancreatic β-cells and improve insulin secretion. They also inhibit carbohydrate-digesting enzymes and reduce hepatic glucose production.

- **Examples and Sources**
  - Chlorogenic acid (*Coffee, apples*) — inhibits glucose absorption in the intestine and improves insulin sensitivity.
  - Gallic acid (*Tea, berries*) — provides antioxidant protection and regulates glucose metabolism.[21]

3.7. Glycosides

- **Description**

Glycosides are compounds where a sugar is bound to a non-sugar moiety (aglycone). They are diverse in structure and biological activity.

- **Antidiabetic Role**

Certain glycosides can mimic insulin action or stimulate its release. They may also inhibit enzymes involved in glucose metabolism and provide protective antioxidant effects.[22]

- **Examples and Sources**
  - Mangiferin (*Mango leaves*) — lowers blood glucose and improves insulin sensitivity.
  - Stevioside (*Stevia rebaudiana*) — enhances insulin secretion and glucose uptake.

3.8. Polysaccharides

- **Description**

Polysaccharides are long-chain carbohydrates made of monosaccharide units, often with immunomodulatory properties.

- **Antidiabetic Role**

They improve glucose tolerance by modulating immune responses and reducing inflammation. Polysaccharides can also slow glucose absorption in the intestine and improve pancreatic function.

- **Examples and Sources**
  - Beta-glucans (*Oats, barley*) — improve insulin resistance and reduce blood sugar.
  - Inulin (*Chicory root*) — acts as a prebiotic, improving gut health and glucose metabolism.

4. CLINICAL STUDIES AND EVIDENCE ON HERBAL DRUGS FOR DIABETES

4.1. Importance of Clinical Studies

- Clinical trials are essential to confirm the safety, efficacy, and dosage of herbal drugs in diabetic patients.[1]
- They help translate promising **in vitro** and **animal model** results into real-world therapeutic applications.
- Well-designed randomized controlled trials (RCTs) provide high-quality evidence to support or refute herbal treatments.

4.2. Common Study Designs

- **Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs)**

Gold standard for testing efficacy; participants randomly assigned to herbal treatment or placebo/standard drug groups.

- **Open-Label Studies**

All participants receive the herbal intervention; useful for preliminary safety and efficacy data.

- **Pilot Studies**

Small-scale trials aimed at assessing feasibility and initial effectiveness.[23]

- **Meta-Analyses and Systematic Reviews**

Combine data from multiple clinical trials to provide stronger conclusions.

4.3. Examples of Herbal Drugs with Clinical Evidence

Gymnema sylvestre

- Multiple RCTs showed significant reductions in fasting blood glucose and HbA1c levels.
- Also improved lipid profiles and promoted β-cell regeneration.
- Generally well tolerated with minimal side effects.

Momordica charantia (Bitter Melon)

- Clinical trials report moderate glucose-lowering effects, especially in type 2 diabetes.
- Some studies noted improved glucose tolerance and insulin sensitivity.
- Variability in results attributed to differences in extract preparation and dosage.

Trigonella foenum-graecum (Fenugreek)

- Shown to decrease fasting blood sugar and postprandial glucose in diabetic patients.
- Contains soluble fiber and saponins which slow carbohydrate absorption.
- Also improves lipid parameters.[24]

Cinnamomum verum (Cinnamon)

- Several clinical trials report modest improvements in fasting blood glucose and HbA1c.
- Mechanisms include enhancing insulin receptor activity and glucose uptake.
- Mixed results highlight the need for standardised dosing and preparation.

Berberine

- Clinical evidence supports berberine's ability to lower blood glucose, improve insulin sensitivity, and reduce cholesterol.
- Comparable efficacy to some oral hypoglycemic drugs in small studies.
- Attention to dose and purity important due to variability in commercial products.

4.4. Safety and Side Effects

- Most herbal interventions in clinical trials have been well tolerated.
- Mild gastrointestinal disturbances are the most common adverse effects.
- Drug-herb interactions require caution, especially when combined with conventional antidiabetic drugs.[25]

4.5. Limitations and Future Directions

- Many trials have small sample sizes, short durations, or lack standardization of herbal extracts.
- More large-scale, long-term RCTs are needed.
- Integration of herbal drugs with conventional therapy requires rigorous clinical guidelines.

5. Safety, Toxicity, and Regulatory Aspects of Herbal Antidiabetic Drugs

5.1. Safety Considerations

- **Generally Perceived as Safe**

Herbal drugs are often considered safer than synthetic medications due to their natural origin and traditional use.

- **Adverse Effects**

Though generally mild, some herbal drugs can cause side effects such as gastrointestinal upset, allergic reactions, or hypoglycemia, especially when combined with conventional antidiabetic drugs.

- **Drug-Herb Interactions**

Potential interactions may enhance or reduce the efficacy of prescription drugs, leading to hypoglycemia or treatment failure. Close monitoring is essential when used concurrently with standard medications.[26]

5.2. Toxicity Evaluation

- **Acute Toxicity Studies**

Assess immediate harmful effects after a single high dose, determining lethal dose (LD_{50}) and safety margins.

- **Sub-Chronic and Chronic Toxicity Studies**

Evaluate effects of repeated administration over weeks or months, focusing on organ toxicity, biochemical changes, and behavioral alterations.

- **Genotoxicity and Mutagenicity Testing**

Determine if herbal compounds cause genetic mutations or chromosomal damage.

- **Examples of Toxicity Concerns**
  - *Aloin* in Aloe vera, if ingested excessively, may cause adverse effects.
  - Contaminants like heavy metals, pesticides, or adulterants in herbal products can cause toxicity.[13]

5.3. Quality Control Challenges

- **Variability in Plant Material**:

Differences in species, growing conditions, harvesting time, and processing affect the concentration of active compounds.

- **Standardization**

Essential to ensure consistent potency and safety; involves quantifying bioactive markers and controlling extract quality.

- **Contamination Risks**

Herbal products may be contaminated with microbes, heavy metals, pesticides, or synthetic drugs.

5.4. Regulatory Framework

- **Regulatory Status Varies by Country**

Herbal medicines are regulated as dietary supplements, traditional medicines, or pharmaceuticals depending on the region.

- **Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP)**

Ensuring quality, safety, and efficacy through standardized production processes.

- **Requirement for Clinical Evidence**

Some countries require evidence from clinical trials for marketing approval; others have more lenient regulations.[28]

- **Labeling and Claims**

Regulations control what health claims can be made, ensuring no misleading information is provided to consumers.

5.5. Recommendations for Safe Use

- Use herbal drugs under medical supervision, especially when combined with other medications.

- Source herbal products from reputable manufacturers that comply with quality standards.
- Monitor blood glucose levels closely to avoid hypoglycemia.
- Report any adverse effects promptly to healthcare providers.

6. CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES IN HERBAL ANTIDIABETIC DRUG DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES

6.1. Standardization and Quality Control

- Herbal preparations often vary due to differences in plant species, cultivation, harvesting, and extraction methods.
- Lack of standardised protocols leads to inconsistent potency and therapeutic effects.[12]

6.2. Scientific Validation

- Many herbal drugs lack rigorous clinical trials to confirm efficacy and safety.
- Limited understanding of precise mechanisms of action and active constituents.

6.3. Safety and Toxicity Concerns

- Potential for contamination with heavy metals, pesticides, or adulterants.
- Risk of herb-drug interactions with conventional antidiabetic medications.

6.4. Regulatory Hurdles

- Diverse and sometimes unclear regulatory frameworks worldwide hinder global acceptance.
- Insufficient guidelines for quality assurance and clinical evaluation.[23]

6.5. Complexity of Phytochemical Mixtures

- Herbal drugs contain multiple bioactive compounds with synergistic or antagonistic effects, complicating pharmacological studies.

6.6. Public Perception and Awareness

- Misinformation and unregulated marketing can lead to misuse or unrealistic expectations.
- Healthcare professionals may lack training on herbal therapeutics.

7. Future Perspectives

7.1. Advanced Analytical Techniques

- Use of metabolomics, proteomics, and genomics to identify active compounds and understand mechanisms.

7.2. Standardized Herbal Formulations

- Development of standardized extracts with known bioactive content to ensure consistent efficacy.[22]

7.3. Robust Clinical Trials

- Large-scale, well-designed randomized controlled trials to provide high-quality evidence.

7.4. Integration with Conventional Medicine

- Combining herbal drugs with standard therapies for synergistic effects and personalized medicine.

7.5. Improved Regulatory Frameworks

- Harmonizing international regulations to facilitate safe herbal product development and marketing.

7.6. Public Education and Professional Training

- Enhancing awareness among consumers and healthcare providers about benefits, risks, and proper use.[17,29,30,31,32,33]

7.7. Nanotechnology and Drug Delivery

- Employing novel delivery systems to improve bioavailability and targeted action of herbal compounds.

CONCLUSION

Herbal drugs offer a promising complementary approach to diabetes management due to their multi-targeted mechanisms, affordability, and generally favorable safety profiles. Their rich phytochemical diversity enables modulation of key metabolic pathways, including insulin secretion, glucose uptake, and antioxidant defense. However, challenges such as lack of standardization, limited clinical evidence, and regulatory complexities must be addressed to ensure consistent efficacy and safety. Advancements in analytical techniques, rigorous clinical trials, and improved quality control will pave the way for integrating herbal medicines into mainstream diabetes care, offering patients effective and accessible therapeutic options.

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