A Brief History of Herbal Medicine

Herbs have been used to transform, diagnose, and treat spiritual, emotional and physical ills in every tradition from the shamanic cultures of Africa, Mexico and Tibet to the highly regulated medical herbalists of today. John E Smith tells us more...

Carbon dating from ancient Babylon (Iraq) records that plants were cultivated as medicines 60,000 years ago. Written materia medica of medicinal herbs go back approximately 5,000 years in India, China and Egypt and at least 2,500 years in Greece and Asia Minor.

Twenty-five hundred years ago, Hippocrates (the father of medical literature), stated as part of his oath: “I will give no deadly medicine to anyone.” Hippocrates used only food and herbs and is best known for the sayings:

“Let your food be your medicine and let medicine be your food”
“Sickness is caused by the body’s inability to digest its environment”

The latter is perhaps particularly relevant in the modern world.

The early years

Herbalism was initially outlawed by early allopathic doctors, largely through professional jealousy. However, the church played a large part in its belief that healing could only be accomplished by God or his ministers; only monks were allowed to grow, or use, herbs for healing. Other herbalists were often burned as witches.

American herbalist, Samuel Thompson, was born in 1769. He was a farmer who experimented successfully with local herbs, such as comfrey and lobelia (both now restricted). He was one of the forerunners of a herbal medicine revival, but like early English herbalists of the 15th and 16th centuries, he was persecuted and imprisoned.

The work of Culpepper, Gerard and Thompson, together with more recent herbalists, Hoxsey, Kloss, Treben, Christopher and Tierra, have maintained a tenuous link with the earlier work of Hippocrates.

Herbal medicine today

Herbalists are no longer burned at the stake, but their freedom to practice is constantly threatened by EU regulations, government policies and the ‘new religion’ of science.

It is generally considered that all medicines should be ‘evidence based’ and validated by scientific research. In making these rulings, several key issues are overlooked. Almost all ‘evidence based’ pharmaceutical medicines, whether prescribed or non-prescribed, have potential side effects. Herbal medicine is not a science, it is a healing art. Herbalists do not target symptoms, they treat individuals, and although two individuals may have identical symptoms, the mode of treatment and the herbs used may differ according to constitution, health history and many other factors. Herbs are not specific medicines, they are ‘special foods’ having many different properties. There are very few cases of herb toxicity and, where toxicity may apply, those herbs are either restricted to practitioner use or banned entirely (often without clear evidence).

Many herbal bodies in the U.K. are currently fighting for regulations in order to protect their profession from further threats to its continuation. Other herbalists feel that we should just be left alone to practice without government interference in accordance with the charter laid out by Henry VIII, or even the 1968 medicines act. It’s a highly debated topic in the herbalist circle and passions run high.

To support the continuance of herbal medicine and the continued availability of over-the-counter herbs and supplements, please do make your point by writing to your local MP. It may help to ensure herbalism has a long and healthy future.

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