



Phytotherapy—An introduction

by Karin Eichele

Phytotherapy is defined as the use of plants or plant extracts for medicinal purposes. Herbal medicines usually refer to plants that are not part of the normal diet.

Herbal medicines have a tradition of thousands of years. Just think of Hippocrates and Galen. Ancient Greek and Roman medicinal practices made use of plants. The ancient medical knowledge was preserved in the monasteries of the Middle Ages. These were once the centres of medical expertise and with their herb gardens provided the source for medicinal preparations. In the centuries following the Middle Ages, university scholars dealt with the topic of herbal medicines. Herbal medicines always played an important role in traditional medicine. However, chemical entities replaced more and more the traditional herbal medicines system and they became the standard practice of the twentieth century.

But even in modern medicine, phytotherapy plays a role. Nowadays, the importance of phytotherapy is again increasing. Many patients prefer herbal medicines and especially value the good tolerability. Furthermore, herbal medicines are now approached far more scientifically. Results from clinical and preclinical studies are meanwhile available for some traditionally used remedies. Modern herbal medicinal products fulfil high standards and are subject to clinical development plans establishing their efficacy and safety. Organisations like the European Scientific Cooperative On Phytotherapy (ESCOP: www.escop.com) aim at advancing the scientific status of phytotherapy. The herbal monographs published by ESCOP are established sources and are accepted by European regulatory authorities.

I have put together a selection of websites and databases of plants used for herbal medicines where you can find useful information on their historical use, indications, safety and chemical composition.

www.herbalgram.org

The homepage of the American Botanical Council is one of the most reliable sources on the Internet regarding herbal medicines. The monographs published by the council are produced by an expert committee formed by the German government to evaluate the safety and efficacy of more than 300 herbs and herb combinations. Most of the content is freely accessible. For full access, e.g. the English translation of the German Commission E monographs, you need to subscribe.

www.pfaf.org

“Plants For A Future” is a source centre for rare and unusual plants. It includes a large database of 7000 plants which are not all rare and unusual. Many are rather quite common and well-known. The database is not only limited to the medicinal use of plants, a useful summary of edible plants is also provided.

www.phytotherapies.org

This site was developed as a source for herbal practitioners. You can browse herbal drug monographs which summarize the historical use, current indications and dosing instructions, pharmacological actions, the major constituents, and reference to clinical or pharmacological studies. The database also allows a search by indication, pharmacological action or constituent. You have to register to access this information, however, this is free of charge.

www.ars-grin.gov/duke

Dr. Duke’s Phytochemical and Ethnobotanical Databases focus on chemicals. Herbal medicinal products contain hundreds of potentially biologically active compounds. Surely it is not valid to extrapolate in vitro effects without further evaluation. However, these compounds, either individually or synergistically, exert physiologic roles and various pharmacologic actions contributing to the overall effect. The database allows the search for chemical constituents of a plant and provides cross-links to the pharmacological action known for the specific substance.

<http://plants.usda.gov/gallery.html>

The PLANTS Gallery is a US database with over 40,000 photos and drawings of plants. The gallery is not restricted to medicinal plants.

If you find a web site that should be mentioned in the next issue, or if you have any other comments or suggestions, please e-mail me at: karin.eichele@bionorica.de.

Karin Eichele

*Bionorica AG
Neumarkt, Germany*

‘Rule of thumb’

‘Rule of thumb’ originates from an old English law which stated that you could not beat your wife with anything wider than a thumb.