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[Pharmacogn Rev](#), 2012 Jan-Jun; 6(11): 1–5.

PMCID: PMC3358962

doi: [10.4103/0973-7847.95849](https://doi.org/10.4103/0973-7847.95849)PMID: [22654398](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22654398/)

Historical review of medicinal plants' usage

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Abstract

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Healing with medicinal plants is as old as mankind itself. The connection between man and his search for drugs in nature dates from the far past, of which there is ample evidence from various sources: written documents, preserved monuments, and even original plant medicines. Awareness of medicinal plants usage is a result of the many years of struggles against illnesses due to which man learned to pursue drugs in barks, seeds, fruit bodies, and other parts of the plants. Contemporary science has acknowledged their active action, and it has included in modern pharmacotherapy a range of drugs of plant origin, known by ancient civilizations and used throughout the millennia. The knowledge of the development of ideas related to the usage of medicinal plants as well as the evolution of awareness has increased the ability of pharmacists and physicians to respond to the challenges that have emerged with the spreading of professional services in facilitation of man's life.

Keywords: History, medicinal plants, plant drugs, usage

INTRODUCTION

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Ever since ancient times, in search for rescue for their disease, the people looked for drugs in nature. The beginnings of the medicinal plants' use were instinctive, as is the case with animals.[1] In view of the fact that at the time there was not sufficient information either concerning the reasons for the illnesses or concerning which plant and how it could be utilized as a cure, everything was based on experience. In time, the reasons for the usage of specific medicinal plants for treatment of certain diseases were being discovered; thus, the medicinal plants' usage gradually abandoned the empiric framework and became founded on explicatory facts. Until the advent of iatrochemistry in 16th century, plants had been the source of treatment and prophylaxis.[2] Nonetheless, the decreasing efficacy of synthetic drugs and the increasing contraindications of their usage make the usage of natural drugs topical again.

HISTORICAL SOURCES RELEVANT FOR STUDY OF MEDICINAL PLANTS' USE

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The oldest written evidence of medicinal plants' usage for preparation of drugs has been found on a Sumerian clay slab from Nagpur, approximately 5000 years old. It comprised 12 recipes for drug preparation referring to over 250 various plants, some of them alkaloid such as poppy, henbane, and mandrake.[2]

The Chinese book on roots and grasses "Pen T'Sao," written by Emperor Shen Nung circa 2500 BC, treats 365 drugs (dried parts of medicinal plants), many of which are used even nowadays such as the following: *Rhei rhisoma*, camphor, *Theae folium*, *Podophyllum*, the great yellow gentian, ginseng, jimson weed, cinnamon bark, and ephedra.[3,4]

The Indian holy books Vedas mention treatment with plants, which are abundant in that country. Numerous spice plants used even today originate from India: nutmeg, pepper, clove, etc.[5]

The Ebers Papyrus, written circa 1550 BC, represents a collection of 800 proscriptions referring to 700 plant species and drugs used for therapy such as pomegranate, castor oil plant, aloe, senna,

garlic, onion, fig, willow, coriander, juniper, common centaury, etc. [6,7]

According to data from the Bible and the holy Jewish book the Talmud, during various rituals accompanying a treatment, aromatic plants were utilized such as myrtle and incense.[8]

In Homer's epics The Iliad and The Odysseys, created circa 800 BC, 63 plant species from the Minoan, Mycenaean, and Egyptian Assyrian pharmacotherapy were referred to. Some of them were given the names after mythological characters from these epics; for instance, Elecampane (*Inula helenium* L. Asteraceae) was named in honor of Elena, who was the centre of the Trojan War. As regards the plants from the genus *Artemisia*, which were believed to restore strength and protect health, their name was derived from the Greek word *artemis*, meaning “healthy.”[9] Herodotus (500 BC) referred to castor oil plant, Orpheus to the fragrant hellebore and garlic, and Pythagoras to the sea onion (*Scilla maritima*), mustard, and cabbage. The works of Hippocrates (459–370 BC) contain 300 medicinal plants classified by physiological action: Wormwood and common centaury (*Centaureum umbellatum Gilib*) were applied against fever; garlic against intestine parasites; opium, henbane, deadly nightshade, and mandrake were used as narcotics; fragrant hellebore and haselwort as emetics; sea onion, celery, parsley, asparagus, and garlic as diuretics; oak and pomegranate as adstringents.[10,11]

Theophrast (371-287 BC) founded botanical science with his books “De Causis Plantarum”—Plant Etiology and “De Historia Plantarum”—Plant History. In the books, he generated a classification of more than 500 medicinal plants known at the time. [12,13] Among others, he referred to cinnamon, iris rhizome, false hellebore, mint, pomegranate, cardamom, fragrant hellebore, monkshood, and so forth. In the description of the plant toxic action, Theophrast underscored the important feature for humans to become accustomed to them by a gradual increase of the doses. Owing to his consideration of the said topics, he gained the epithet of “the father of botany,” given that he has great merits for the classification and description of medicinal plants.[14,15]

In his work “*De re medica*” the renowned medical writer Celsus (25

BC–50 AD) quoted approximately 250 medicinal plants such as aloe, henbane, flax, poppy, pepper, cinnamon, the star gentian, cardamom, false hellebore, etc.[16]

In ancient history, the most prominent writer on plant drugs was Dioscorides, “the father of pharmacognosy,” who, as a military physician and pharmacognosist of Nero's Army, studied medicinal plants wherever he travelled with the Roman Army. Circa 77 AD he wrote the work “De Materia Medica.” This classical work of ancient history, translated many times, offers plenty of data on the medicinal plants constituting the basic *materia medica* until the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance.[17,18] Of the total of 944 drugs described, 657 are of plant origin, with descriptions of the outward appearance, locality, mode of collection, making of the medicinal preparations, and their therapeutic effect. In addition to the plant description, the names in other languages coupled with the localities where they occur or are grown are provided. The plants having mild effect are dominant, but there are also references to those containing alkaloid or other matter with strong effect (fragrant hellebore, false hellebore, poppy, buttercup, jimson weed, henbane, deadly nightshade).[21,22] Dioscorides’ most appreciated domestic plants are as follows: willow, camomile, garlic, onion, marsh mallow, ivy, nettle, sage, common centaury, coriander, parsley, sea onion, and false hellebore). Camomile (*Matricaria recucita* L.), known under the name Chamaemelon, is used as an antiphlogistic to cure wounds, stings, burns, and ulcers, then for cleansing and rinsing the eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. Owing to its mild carminative action, it is particularly appropriate for usage with children. Dioscorides deemed that it had abortive action, on which he wrote, “The flower, root, and the entire plant accelerate menstruation, the release of the embryo, and the discharge of urine and stone, provided that they are used in the form of an infusion and baths.” This untrue belief was later embraced by both the Romans and the Arabs; hence the Latin name *Matricaria*, derived from two words: *mater* denoting “mother,” i.e. matrix, denoting ‘uterus’. Dioscorides differentiated between a number of species from the genus *Mentha*, which were grown and used to relieve headache and stomach ache. The bulbs of sea onion and parsley were utilized as diuretics, oak bark was used for gynaecological purposes, while white willow was used as an

antipyretic. As maintained by Dioscorides, *Scillae bulbosus* was also applied as an expectorant, cardiac stimulant, and antihydrotic.[23] It is worth underscoring that Dioscorides pointed to the possibility of forgery of drugs, both the domestic ones such as opium forged by a yellow poppy (*Glaucium flavum*) milk sap and poppy, and the more expensive oriental drugs, transported by the Arab merchants from the Far East, such as iris, calamus, caradmomum, incense, etc.[8]

Pliny the Elder (23 AD-79), a contemporary of Dioscorides, who travelled throughout Germany and Spain, wrote about approximately 1000 medicinal plants in his book “Historia naturalis.” Pliny's and Dioscorides’ works incorporated all knowledge of medicinal plants at the time.[9]

The most distinguished Roman physician (concurrently a pharmacist), Galen (131 AD–200), compiled the first list of drugs with similar or identical action (parallel drugs), which are interchangeable—“De succedanus.” From today's point of view, some of the proposed substitutes do not correspond in a pharmacological context and are absolutely unacceptable. Galen also introduced several new plant drugs in therapy that Dioscorides had not described, for instance, *Uvae ursi folium*, used as an uroantiseptic and a mild diuretic even in this day and age.

In the seventh century AD the Slavic people used *Rosmarinus officinalis*, *Ocimum basilicum*, *Iris germanica*, and *Mentha viridis* in cosmetics, *Alium sativum* as a remedy and *Veratrum album*, *Cucumis sativus*, *Urtica dioica*, *Achilea millefolium*, *Artemisia maritime* L., *Lavandula officinalis*, *Sambuci flos* against several injurious insects, i.e. louses, fleas, moths, mosquitos, and spiders and *Aconitum napellus* as a poison in hunting.[10]

In the Middle Ages, the skills of healing, cultivation of medicinal plants, and preparation of drugs moved to monasteries. Therapy was based on 16 medicinal plants, which the physicians-monks commonly grew within the monasteries as follows: sage, anise, mint, Greek seed, savory, tansy, etc.

Charles the Great (742 AD–814), the founder of the reputed medical school in Salerno, in his “Capitularies” ordered which medicinal plants were to be grown on the state-owned lands. Around 100

different plants were quoted, which have been used till present days such as sage, sea onion, iris, mint, common centaury, poppy, marsh mallow, etc. The great emperor especially appreciated the sage (*Salvia officinalis* L.). The Latin name of sage originates from the old Latins, who called it a salvation plant (*salvare* meaning “save, cure”). Even today sage is a mandatory plant in all Catholic monasteries. [23,24]

The Arabs introduced numerous new plants in pharmacotherapy, mostly from India, a country they used to have trade relations with, whereas the majority of the plants were with real medicinal value, and they have persisted in all pharmacopoeias in the world till today. The Arabs used aloe, deadly nightshade, henbane, coffee, ginger, strychnos, saffron, curcuma, pepper, cinnamon, rheum, senna, and so forth. Certain drugs with strong action were replaced by drugs with mild action, for instance, *Sennae folium* was used as a mild laxative, compared to the purgatives *Heleborus odorus* and *Euphorbium* used until then.

Throughout the Middle Ages European physicians consulted the Arab works “De Re Medica” by John Mesue (850 AD), “Canon Medicinae” by Avicenna (980-1037), and “Liber Magnae Collectionis Simplicium Alimentorum Et Medicamentorum” by Ibn Baitar (1197-1248), in which over 1000 medicinal plants were described. [7]

For Macedonia, St Clement and St Naum of Ohrid's work are of particular significance. They referred to the Nikeian pharmacological codex dating from year 850, and transferred his extensive knowledge on medicinal plants to his disciples and via them to the masses. [15,19,20]

Marco Polo's journeys (1254-1324) in tropical Asia, China, and Persia, the discovery of America (1492), and Vasco De Gama's journeys to India (1498), resulted in many medicinal plants being brought into Europe. Botanical gardens emerged all over Europe, and attempts were made for cultivation of domestic medicinal plants and of the ones imported from the old and the new world. With the discovery of America, materia medica was enriched with a large number of new medicinal plants: *Cinchona*, *Ipecacuanha*, *Cacao*, *Ratanhia*, *Lobelia*, *Jalapa*, *Podophylum*, *Senega*, *Vanilla*, *Mate*,

tobacco, red pepper, etc. In 17th century, *Cortex Chinae*, yielded from quinine bark *Cinchona succirubra* Pavon, under the name countess' powder, since the Countess of Chinchon was the first one who used it, was introduced to European medicine. Quinine bark rapidly overwhelmed England, France, and Germany despite the fact that there was many an opponent to its use among distinguished physicians—members of a range of academies.

Paracelsus (1493-1541) was one of the proponents of chemically prepared drugs out of raw plants and mineral substances; nonetheless, he was a firm believer that the collection of those substances ought to be astrologically determined. He continuously emphasized his belief in observation, and simultaneously supported the “Signatura doctrinae”—the signature doctrine. According to this belief, God designated his own sign on the healing substances, which indicated their application for certain diseases. For example, the haselwort is reminiscent of the liver; thus, it must be beneficial for liver diseases; St John's wort *Hypericum perforatum* L. would be beneficial for treatment of wounds and stings given that the plant leaves appear as if they had been stung.

While the old peoples used medicinal plants primarily as simple pharmaceutical forms—infusions, decoctions and macerations—in the Middle Ages, and in particular between 16th and 18th centuries, the demand for compound drugs was increasing. The compound drugs comprised medicinal plants along with drugs of animal and plant origin. If the drug the theriac was produced from a number of medicinal plants, rare animals, and minerals, it was highly valued and sold expensively. [9,10]

In 18th century, in his work *Species Plantarum* (1753), Linnaeus (1707-1788) provided a brief description and classification of the species described until then. The species were described and named without taking into consideration whether some of them had previously been described somewhere. For the naming, a polynomial system was employed where the first word denoted the genus while the remaining polynomial phrase explained other features of the plant (e.g. the willow Clusius was named *Salix pumila angustifolia antera*). Linnaeus altered the naming system into a binominal one. The name of each species consisted of the genus

name, with an initial capital letter, and the species name, with an initial small letter.[25]

Early 19th century was a turning point in the knowledge and use of medicinal plants. The discovery, substantiation, and isolation of alkaloids from poppy (1806), ipecacuanha (1817), strychnos (1817), quinine (1820), pomegranate (1878), and other plants, then the isolation of glycosides, marked the beginning of scientific pharmacy. With the upgrading of the chemical methods, other active substances from medicinal plants were also discovered such as tannins, saponosides, etheric oils, vitamins, hormones, etc.[26]

In late 19th and early 20th centuries, there was a great danger of elimination of medicinal plants from therapy. Many authors wrote that drugs obtained from them had many shortcomings due to the destructive action of enzymes, which cause fundamental changes during the process of medicinal plants drying, i.e. medicinal plants' healing action depends on the mode of drying. In 19th century, therapeutics, alkaloids, and glycosides isolated in pure form were increasingly supplanting the drugs from which they had been isolated. Nevertheless, it was soon ascertained that although the action of pure alkaloids was faster, the action of alkaloid drugs was full and long-lasting. In early 20th century, stabilization methods for fresh medicinal plants were proposed, especially the ones with labile medicinal components. Besides, much effort was invested in study of the conditions of manufacturing and cultivation of medicinal plants.[27,28]

On account of chemical, physiological, and clinical studies, numerous forgotten plants and drugs obtained thereof were restored to pharmacy: *Aconitum*, *Punica granatum*, *Hyosciamus*, *Stramonium*, *Secale cornutum*, *Filix mas*, *Opium*, *Styrax*, *Colchicum*, *Ricinus*, and so forth. The active components of medicinal plants are a product of the natural, most seamless laboratory. The human organism accepts the drug obtained from them best in view of the fact that man is an integral part of nature.[29] There are scores of examples of this kind; perhaps they will instigate serious research into the old manuscripts on medicinal plants, which would not be observed out of curiosity about history but as potential sources of contemporary pharmacotherapy.

In present days, almost all pharmacopoeias in the world—Ph Eur 6, [30] USP XXXI,[31] BP 2007[32]—proscribe plant drugs of real medicinal value. There are countries (the United Kingdom,[32] Russia, Germany[33]) that have separate herbal pharmacopoeias. Yet, in practice, a much higher number of unofficial drugs are always used. Their application is grounded on the experiences of popular medicine (traditional or popular medicine) or on the new scientific research and experimental results (conventional medicine). Many medicinal plants are applied through self-medication or at the recommendation of a physician or pharmacist. They are used independently or in combination with synthetic drugs (complementary medicine). For the sake of adequate and successfully applied therapy, knowledge of the precise diagnosis of the illness as well as of medicinal plants, i.e. the pharmacological effect of their components is essential. Plant drugs and phytopreparations, most commonly with defined active components, verified action and, sometimes, therapeutic efficiency, are applied as therapeutic means. In the major European producer and consumer of herbal preparations—Germany, rational phytotherapy is employed, based on applications of preparations whose efficiency depends on the applied dose and identified active components, and their efficiency has been corroborated by experimental and clinical tests. Those preparations have been manufactured from standardized plant drug extracts, and they adhere to all requirements for pharmaceutical quality of drugs.

With the new Law on Drugs and Medical Devices dated September 2007[34] and enacted in the Republic of Macedonia, dry or sometimes fresh parts of medicinal plants (herbal substances) may be used for preparation of herbal drugs, herbal processed products, and traditional herbal drugs. Herbal substances may also be utilized for manufacture of homeopathic drugs, which are stipulated in the current law, too. In the Republic of Macedonia herbal preparations are dispensed without a medical prescription, as “over the counter” (OTC) preparations.

CONCLUSIONS

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Since time immemorial people have tried to find medications to alleviate pain and cure different illnesses. In every period, every

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successive century from the development of humankind and advanced civilizations, the healing properties of certain medicinal plants were identified, noted, and conveyed to the successive generations. The benefits of one society were passed on to another, which upgraded the old properties, discovered new ones, till present days. The continuous and perpetual people's interest in medicinal plants has brought about today's modern and sophisticated fashion of their processing and usage.

Footnotes

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Source of Support: Nil

Conflict of Interest: None declared

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