

## Editorial

### **WHO issues guidelines for herbal medicines**

Herbal medicines represent some 20% of the overall drug market. In Africa, up to 80% of the population depends on traditional medicine for primary health care. In China, herbal preparations account for up to 50% of total consumption. In Europe, North America, and other industrialized areas, more than 50% reported using complementary or alternative medicine at least once, according to World Health Organization (WHO). Yet only China, Japan, and the European Union have regulations for medicinal plants.

Medicines derived from plants, such as ginseng and echinacea, have become increasingly popular in rich countries and continue to be widely used in the developing world. However, this increase in popularity has been accompanied by an increase in the number of reported cases of damage to health from the use of herbal medicines.

Among many other causes, the incorrect identification of plants is leading to health problems. In late nineties in the United States, people suffered from serious heart problems after using accidentally digitalis as a substitute for plantain in dietary supplements. In Hong Kong, fourteen cases of poisoning have been also reported resulting from the usage of wrong root to produce an antiviral medicine. Other problems identified included the use of poor quality plants, poor collection practices and the adding of other medications (such as steroids) to herbal remedies.

Dr. Hans Hogerzeil, acting director of essential drugs and medicine for the WHO, said that there is a huge increase in this market as many people are paying a lot for traditional medicines, and some insurance systems have started to reimburse (for) traditional remedies.

This growing demand has been also a major concern for environmentalists and conservationists as fears that plants could be wiped out by unsustainable harvesting were expressed. The bark of the Pygeum (African prune), used widely as a remedy for prostate disorders in southern Europe, is collected by killing the tree or simply cutting it down while it can be harvested without causing any damages to the resources. Thus, wild ginseng is reported to be declining rapidly, and other plants are endangered such as goldenseal, echinacea, black cohosh, slippery elm and kava kava.

Taking into consideration all the problems arising and referring to the guidelines used in China, Japan and the European Union, recently the WHO issued guidelines for ensuring the safety, sustainability and efficacy of the multibillion-dollar herbal medicines market amid reports that some products are tainted with toxic substances. The guidelines are addressed for national regulatory bodies and lay out the best techniques for growing and harvesting medicinal plants used for various ailments or weight loss, as well as the clear labeling of the contents of any product. These are not binding guidelines for any country; instead it is a model, which can be used to elaborate and formulate countries' own national regulations. The 72-page document covers cultivating, collecting and classifying plants, with recommendations on quality control, storage, labeling and distribution.

On the other hands, a consumer alert on the safety of dietary supplements containing ephedra (called Ma huang) and on the adrenaline like stimulant, used for weight loss or to boost sports performance which can have dangerous effects on the heart was issued last December by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

**For more information on WHO guidelines, go to:**  
<http://www.who.int/medicines/library/trm/guidelinesdocs.shtml>

*Elsa J. Sattout*

**Sources:** Reuters & Associated Press Writer - February 11,2004.



## News

### **IBSAR members participated in The 2<sup>nd</sup> workshop on national biodiversity strategies**

January 17-19, 2004- in Damascus, Syria. Dr. Talhouk and Ms. Elsa Sattout attended a workshop organized by the Arab Center for the Studies of Arid Zones and Dry Lands (ACSAD) which has been by CAMRE (Council of Arab Ministers Responsible for the Environment) as the organization responsible for biodiversity planning, coordination, and promotion in the Arab world. S. Talhouk presented a paper entitled the "involvement of the private sector in the sustainable use of biodiversity". The authors of the paper included K. Al Abdallah, D. Jamali, and N. Kabbani. The purpose of the paper was to evaluate the notion of sustainable use of biodiversity by the private sector.

**Award to H. Mohtaseb!!!** Who won the first prize of Dr. Suad Sabbah award for the scientific category for her study on vitamin E, which was presented by the AUB Alumni Association during a gala dinner on the occasion of AUB Founders' Day held at the Bristol Hotel on Friday December 5, 2003.



*Al Nahar, 11 December 2003*

**Interesting articles.** Below is the link to an interesting site for UNDP publication related to Conservation and Wise Use of Indigenous and Medicinal Plants proposed by M. Batal.:

<http://tcdc.undp.org/tcdcweb/experiences/vol7/content7.html>

In which, 11 case studies in different developing countries are summarized showing background and justification for research, lesson learned, impact and future plan of each case study. These are:

- Herbal Solutions: Bangladesh
- Conservation and Cultural Values: Brazil
- Ancient and Modern Medicinal Herbs: China
- Mungbeans: Taiwan
- Menthol Mint: India
- Zataria Multiflora: Iran
- Eugenia Jambolana: Madagascar
- Robotic Technology: Malaysia
- Wild Plants for Medicinal and Food Plants: Pakistan
- Buchu Commercialization: South Africa
- Traditional Medicine: Swaziland

### **Meetings, contacts & Seminars Meetings**

#### **IBSAR Meeting of December 11.**

Presentation by E. Abu Fakhr Hammad "IBSAR Insecticidal Group" in which she gave a brief review about her work, the methodology adopted, result future recommendations and studied to be conducted for further testing of interesting plant extracts. (Presentation is on the web).

#### **IBSAR Meeting of January 8.**

Presentation by H. Mohatseb, N. Darwiche and M. El Sabban entitled "Anticancer Effects of Medicinal herbs from Lebanon" in which they gave a general briefing about cancer, its mechanism of action, types of cancer the group is working on, methodology used (in vitro and in vivo), the studies done so far and their results and future studies.

(Presentation is on the web).



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### ***IBSAR Meeting of January 22.***

Presentation by E. Barbour entitled "Immunopotential and antimicrobial activities in Medicinal herbs".  
(Presentation is on the web).

***Executive committee meetings.*** In its last meeting the executive committee discussed the visit of Dr. William Hoffman to Lebanon and met with Ms. Ciccipio. (more on the web)

### **Fund Raising**

#### ***Funds received!***

#### ***Proposal submitted***

IBSAR submitted a proposal to a Saudi Arabian donor; Mr. Y. Jamil, who showed high interest in funding IBSAR activities. The proposal is entitled: "Bioprospecting in the Middle East". (Submission date Dec. 2003)

### **Publications on Traditional Medicine**

#### ***General Guidelines for Methodologies on Research and Evaluation of Traditional Medicine***

These general guidelines were developed in response to the question related to the types of academic research approaches and methods that can be used to evaluate the safety and efficacy of traditional medicine. The guidelines consist of sections on herbal medicines, traditional procedure-based therapies, clinical research, and related issues including ethics, education and training, and surveillance systems.

The specific objectives of the guidelines are to: harmonize the use of certain accepted and important terms in traditional medicine; summarize key

issues for developing methodologies for research and evaluation of traditional medicine; improve the quality and value of research in traditional medicine; and provide appropriate evaluation methods to facilitate the development of regulation and registration of traditional medicine.

#### ***Guidelines for the assessment of herbal medicines***

At its thirty-fourth meeting, WHO's Expert Committee on Specifications for Pharmaceutical Preparations adopted guidelines for the assessment of herbal medicines. The guidelines define criteria for the evaluation of the safety, efficacy, and quality of herbal medicines, and thereby assist national regulatory authorities, scientific organizations, and manufacturers in undertaking an assessment of the documentation/submissions/dossiers on such products.

For your precious contribution to this invaluable newsletter ....., including the editorial section contact M. Daouk at [me11@aub.edu.lb](mailto:me11@aub.edu.lb)  
Submission deadlines 20<sup>th</sup> of each month.