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Health corner: History of natural health

“Complementary” or “alternative” medicine has been the only way of healing people in every corner of the world for millennia. All cultures have their Tohunga, as they are called in Maori - wise people, who long before science knew about the power of plants and used them to help people. The plants they used then are still used today and with great effect.

Take the yew tree (*Taxus baccata*) of middle and southern Europe: Highly poisonous, it provided the first beta blocker in the treatment of heart disease. One of its constituents was used in chemotherapy for cancer treatment.

The salicylic acid in Meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria* or *Spiraea ulmaria*) was used for the development of the first non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug. It was discovered in 1897 by **Felix Hoffmann**, an employee of Bayer AG, who used the discovery to create the drug Aspirin. Foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*) was shown to contain the cardiac drug glycoside digoxin which was approved in 1998 as an effective treatment for heart failure and atrial fibrillation.

Herbal medicine was traditionally the domain of the spiritual/philosophical world. Most herbs have roles in religious rituals, featuring them in the context of death, marriage and other major events of life.

Rosemary was used to ward off evil spirits and was laid into coffins and graves. Lilly of the Valley (though not used as a medicinal plant) is the messenger of happiness and spring, new beginnings.

It is therefore not surprising that the recording of plant knowledge often fell to the members of the clergy. We have many examples of this in Europe alone: The Swiss **Pfarrer Kuenzle** (born in 1857) wrote “Chrut und Uchrut”. **Maria Treben** wrote the small but informative book “God’s pharmacy” in the 1970’s.

The Abbess **Hildegard von Bingen** (1098 – 1179) wrote not only books on herbs, but also on mythical theology and musical compositions that stemmed from “voices from heaven” - visions she had experienced since the age of five.



Herbal plants have been documented for millennia

The earliest recorded data of medicinal plants date from 1552 BC, in an **Egyptian** collection of 110 sheets of papyrus that listed methods, minerals, spells and plants, and from 2500 BC, when an Egyptian physician called **Imhotep** recorded ways to treat wounds, prevent infections and some advice on hygiene.

Considered the father of Western Medicine, **Hippocrates** (460-370BC) elevated the discipline from religion by postulating that disease occurred by an act of nature, not by an act of punishment by a god. He also put into place important standards of behaviour and ethics which are still referred to today when a graduate is induced into the profession. This is known as the Hippocratic Oath. Another important legacy he left to medicine is diagnostic and prognostic observation, and notes on the progression of a disease.

Claudius Galenus (Galen, born in 129AD) was a very sought-after and successful Greek-Roman physician to the most prestigious gladiators and rulers. He laid the foundation to today’s medicine by exploring the human body and making the connection between blood and heart, examining the different organs and concluding that the brain controls all movements and activities. Further, he uncovered the distinction between the autonomic (unconscious) and somatic (conscious) nervous system, as well as many more anatomical principles that govern the understanding of human sciences today.

The works of Greek physician, botanist and pharmacologist **Pedanius Dioscorides** are contained in a five-volume *Materia Medica*, written in Greek, Latin and Arabic (60 AD). These were translated and passed on throughout the centuries and form the basis of modern pharmacopeias, or *materia medica*: Books that list plants and their therapeutic applications.

Paracelsus, a physician, botanist, alchemist and astrologer born near Einsiedeln in Switzerland in the 17th century laid the foundation for many theories including toxicology (“*Alle Ding’ sind Gift, und nichts ohn’ Gift; allein die Dosis macht, daß ein Ding kein Gift ist*”). He assigned elements to different planets (such as gold to the sun) and explored how these affected human organs (such as the human heart) - similar to Chinese traditions. He also believed in the idea that every creature was a miniature representation of the universe (microcosmos – macrocosmos), similar to the teachings in Buddhism.



Paracelsus

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Paracelsus.jpg>

With this, he not only brought together ideas of Chinese and Indian philosophies, but also laid the foundations for what later crystallised into Homeopathy, a unique naturopathic modality that is based on the principle of “like cures like”.

Homeopathy was first explored by the German physician Dr **Samuel Hahnemann** in the early 19th century.

History of natural health cont.

Hahnemann discovered this theory during the study of the Cinchona tree, used for the treatment of Malaria to this day. He noted that if he used this plant on himself while healthy, he developed symptoms like those experienced in Malaria.

This brought him to the theory that a substance that induced symptoms in a healthy person would eliminate the symptoms in a person suffering from them. He researched this idea further and wrote two major works, "the Organon of Healing" and the "Materia Medica Pura", which are first instructions and collections of substances used for homoeopathic practices.

Indian Ayurveda is quite distinct from the Western idea of the human body and has been practiced for millenia. It uses elements such as foods, herbs, yoga, meditation and lifestyle in its health science.

The influence of the five elements ether, air, fire, water and earth on the body create the three doshas: Kapha, pitta, vata. Balance of these doshas is the key to health.

Records of herbs in **Chinese medicine** have been found to have been made around the same time as our Greek tradition. Some distinguishing features of Chinese medicine include the power of Qi, the energy flow and the channels it uses to energise the body, the assigning of elements and planets to different organs and the description of ailments as being the result of conditions such as damp, dry, hot, cold, or a combination of the four. Herbs and elements were combined and assigned to address these conditions.

The discovery of penicillium notatum - the mould bacterium used as an antibiotic - by Scottish biologist **Alexander Fleming** in 1928 marked the beginning of a sharp veering away from traditional medical practices. This discovery was put to the test during World War II. The fact that the lives of many injured soldiers could be saved with this "magic mould" meant a turning point in medicine. World War II is considered the beginning of medicine as we know it today. Less than a hundred years ago! What a fantastic tool in the care of mankind.

These are just a few milestones in the history of medicine. However, the crux of holistic medicine and the universal connection between the practitioner and the patient, and the intuitive power that drives the treatment, cannot be recorded. Neither can the gift that we receive from our elders and from nature when we listen, quietly, for its message.

In my opinion, medicine of today forgets that while medicines like antibiotica are indispensable tools in emergency measures, true health is best maintained by using plants, traditional medicines, good nutrition and a balanced lifestyle.

And never forget who governs us: NATURE.

I am happy to add that in a 2009 referendum, two thirds of the people of Switzerland voted in favour of making complementary therapies available as part of medical care.

By Trudi Fill-Weidmann

Sources: Wikipedia.

Swiss news: September 22 ballot - vote outcomes remain uncertain, except for army

Close results are expected later this month when voters decide on petrol station shops (liberalisation of night-time shopping at certain petrol stations) and vaccination campaigns. A proposal to scrap conscription however is heading for defeat according to the latest opinion polls.

Political scientist Claude Longchamp says one of the main findings of the survey by his GfS Bern research and polling institute is a comparatively low-key campaign ahead of the September 22 ballots.

Commissioned by the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation, the poll was published on 11 September. "There is hardly any public debate or it has had no impact on citizens," he says.

...

An initiative by the pacifist "Switzerland without an Army" group is set to fail according to the pollsters.

Supporters of conscription are more than 30 percentage points ahead. Opponents hope to mobilise young voters in the run-up to polling day. However, political scientist Lukas Golder of GfS Bern points to a relatively bland campaign by the pacifists.

It is the third vote in more than 20 years on Switzerland's armed forces, which continue to enjoy widespread popular support as a factor of cohesion in society.

Critics, however, argue conscription for able-bodied male citizens should be scrapped and a professional army of volunteers, replacing the current militia system with its roughly 185,000 members, would be better suited and more efficient to respond to the needs of a modern society.

Extracted from www.swissinfo.ch (11 September 2013), article by Urs Geiser

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