

Rodwell-Jay Mackinnon-NIMH Council-press release ERNST REPORT
“ESSENTIALLY FLAWED” SAY HERBAL EXPERTS

A recent report on the efficacy of herbal medicine, published in the Journal of Postgraduate Medicine, is “of limited value and essentially flawed” a spokesperson for the National Institute of Medical Herbalists commented today.

The report, compiled by Professor Edzard Ernst, of the Peninsula Medical School, University of Exeter, claims that there is no good evidence that “individualised” herbal medicine prescriptions are effective.

Basing his comments on a review of just three studies, Professor Ernst claims that his conclusions prove the inefficacy of this traditional application of herbal medicine.

In response to his report, the National Institute of Herbal Medicine(NIMH) – whose members make up the majority of western medical herbalists practicing in the UK – has issued this statement:

“We believe that the report issued by Professor Ernst is of limited value and essentially flawed. There is no evidence to support his statement that individualised herbal medicine is ineffective. The very small number of studies upon which he has based his findings is insufficient to reach a conclusion of any kind on herbal medicine in general.

“In addition, only one of the studies reviewed was on western herbal medicine as our members practice it, and this was merely a pilot study on only 14 patients, instituted to ascertain whether it was either possible or indeed relevant to undertake a randomised double blind controlled trial(RCT) in this field.

“The pilot study did show that an RCT was viable, and Guo et al 1 (see Ernst report) concur with our findings. However, we and they differ fundamentally in various areas. Amongst these are:

- a. We believe that Western Herbal Medicine and Traditional Chinese Medicine should not be grouped together, as they use radically different diagnostic techniques and materia medica.
- b. We believe that it is poor science to draw, from this single pilot study, any conclusion on the benefits of western herbal medicine.
- c. The pilot study showed positive trends, which should be followed up by a larger study.

The NIMH spokesperson pointed out that their members, all of whom are traditional herbalists, have diagnostic and clinical training at a degree level comparable to that of “orthodox” medical practitioners. In addition, they have a rigorous training in phytochemistry and prescribe, as do “orthodox” practitioners, on the basis of pathophysiology.

To the accusation that traditional herbalists do “more harm than good” the NIMH spokesperson commented that if that were true, then evidence would have surfaced by now via the Yellow Card reporting system administered by the Medicines and

Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA). NIMH has reported via the Yellow Card system for some 10 years, and the public has been able to do so directly since 2005. However, unlike “orthodox” medicine, which is the acknowledged cause of thousands of deaths annually, by misadministration, inappropriate prescription, and inappropriate self-medication, no such evidence existed.

To the contrary, evidence that traditional western herbal medicine, as practiced by members of NIMH, was an effective and positive force for good, existed in abundance, in clinical audit and collected case studies, and in empirical and anecdotal evidence.

The need for further research is recognized and embraced, says the spokesperson. “Phytotherapeutic research is highly relevant to traditional herbal medicine, “ she said. “Herbal medicine is firmly rooted in physiology and pathophysiology, and advances in knowledge are taken on board just as they are in ‘orthodox’ medical practice. Because we are trained in the biomedical sciences, we recognise the value of all good research, and our adoption of new techniques and new knowledge is part of our continuing post-graduate study”.

1.A systematic review of randomised clinical trials of individualised herbal medicine in any indication R Guo, P H Canter, E Ernst Notes for Editors

1.The National Institute of Medical Herbalists is the UK's leading professional body representing herbal medicine practitioners.

First established as the National Association of Medical Herbalists in 1864, today the National Institute of Medical Herbalists has more than 700 members across the UK and beyond.

The Institute promotes the benefits of herbal medicine and oversees the provision of the best patient care through the work of its members.

NIMH members undergo a lengthy training programme before they can register as qualified medical herbalists. Practitioners train for at least three years and adhere to a strict code of conduct before they can gain MNIMH or FNIMH after their name. Recently qualified practitioners will have taken a BSc in Phytotherapy (herbal medicine). All NIMH-registered herbalists are fully insured, and follow a strict code of conduct.

NIMH-registered medical herbalists are trained in the same diagnostic skills as mainstream doctors but take a more holistic approach to treating illness. Herbalists treat a wide range of acute and chronic conditions and frequently work in collaboration with GPs and consultants to achieve the best combination of treatments for individual patients.

NIMH can be contacted at 54 Mary Arches Street Exeter EX4 3BA
Tel: +44 (0)1392 426022 Fax: +44 (0) 1392 498963 E-mail:info@nimh.org.uk

2.. The Peninsula Medical School is a centre for research in complementary and alternative medicine based at Exeter University. It is, or has been, funded by, amongst other organisations, pharmaceutical companies such as Boots The Chemist, Lichtwer Pharma, Pharmaton SA, Schwabe GmbH, and Novogen