

Book review

WHO, *Regulatory Situation of Herbal Medicine*, World Health Organization, Geneva, TRM/98.1.

Slowly, the world is edging towards a sensible attitude to herbal medicines, but it still has a long way to go. If one were capable of looking at the issue logically, it would not be so difficult. It is perfectly evident, and proven up to the hilt, that herbs are a rich source of medicinally active substances, but that they are also repositories of toxins. These basic facts do not themselves lead to contention. The problems and the arguments are what one might, for want of a better word, term philosophical.

On the one hand, orthodox researchers in medicine point to the successes of science in extracting and testing one active component after another from plant material, and putting it into a standardized and purified form; over two centuries, digitalis, atropine, quinine and a wide range of other substances down to the vinca alkaloids and paclitaxel have come into medicine in that way and have enriched it. At the same time, that process has rejected a great many other substances which have proved to be either valueless or encumbered by a poor efficacy/safety ratio.

On the other hand there is a large group of proponents of herbal medicine who will claim that many a plant product is effective and safe because of a “natural” balance between multiple components which cannot possibly be attained when single ingredients are extracted and purified. The rejection by scientific method of particular herbal products as useless or undesirable is often enough attributed to professional jealousy or to a failure to recognize the importance of very long-term experience in the community.

When a country sets out to regulate herbal medicine it has to act both scientifically and tactfully at the same time, recognizing that herbal medicines often do have value but that they also enjoy a vast popular following. Many regulatory systems have now sensibly adopted a two-stream approach to regulation of such products. Those which can and do attain orthodox scientific standards of efficacy, quality and safety are registered in the normal manner. All others are accepted through a special procedure provided that there is evidence that they are safe, that the claims are modest, and that it is made entirely clear that their use is based in belief and trust rather than proof.

The adder under the grass which often comes into evidence when one tries to approach the field rationally is that herbal medicine is not entirely the domain of priests proclaiming rich and ancient tradition. All too many of the voices to be heard are those of hard-nosed businessmen making herbal remedies for profit; and a certain proportion of those individuals are less than scrupulous about what they sell, or what proportion of nonsense they are prepared to foist on their customers. In one country which set out recently to tackle the herbal medicine market by regulation, fifty out of the sixty representations received were from manufacturers; some of the others came from true believers who were however heavily dependent on the manufacturers for their facts and arguments. For such reasons, most other countries which have come to grips with the topic already have archives filled with records of turnips floating in cheap wine (and masquerading as ginseng), Chinese herbals laced with corticosteroids, and herbal mixtures the composition of which appears to vary by the batch, by the season, or even at random.

It is to the credit of the German Federation of Medicine Manufacturers (BAH) that one of its scientists has compiled this useful and accurate overview of the regulatory scene across the world. It shows how far many countries have gone in developing a pragmatic regulatory solution to the question of herbals; it also provides a useful guide to others in developing their own approaches. It should now be complemented

by a review of the successes, problems and failures encountered as countries put these principles into practice in order to provide the public with a greater measure of protection than they have enjoyed in the past.