

Editorial

Special Series: Herbals, Botanicals and Functional Foods

For centuries, plants have been consumed both for their nutritive and their curative properties. Rich traditions in the use of a wide variety of medicinal herbs exist in Chinese, Indian and native American Indian cultures. Europeans, and Germans in particular, have been and continue to be active consumers of alternative medicines including herbal teas and supplements. Naturally occurring is not equivalent with safe, as we know from the use of comfrey as well as the use of the native American herbal medicine, tobacco. Some products have proven toxic; others appear to show efficacy in improving health. Germany was the first country to commission an evaluation of the health claims of many of these products, in the form of the Commission E reports of the Federal Health Office. This commission was unfortunately dissolved several years ago.

Although relatively new to the area, the American public is starting to incorporate herbal products into daily life with the usual enthusiasm, such that the herbal supplement industry is now, according to the Director of the National Nutritional Food Association a \$12 billion industry, with over 30,000 herbal products on the market. A recent meeting sponsored by the United States National Institutes of Health, the Department of Health and Human Services and the Food and Drug Administration met to 'Evaluate Research Needs on the Use and Safety of Medicinal Herbs'. This meeting expected to draw 125 participants, closed registration at 350, and sent the sessions live by satellite to other sites around the country.

This meeting brought home the point that for almost all herbal products, there is a paucity of scientific data on their efficacy as well as the health effects of chronic use in human populations. Up-to-date, systematic evaluations of the existing science are not readily available to the public health nutrition community. And yet, one of the greatest interest areas in nutrition, from the point of view of the consumer, is the evidence of relationships between intake of specific herbal and botanical products or functional foods and health. The public is self-prescribing these products, and turning to nutritionists for guidance. To enhance the knowledge base of nutritionists in this area, this journal is beginning a series of articles on plants used as nutritional supplements or herbal medicines. The kick-off to this series is the lead article in the next issue of *Public Health Nutrition*, 'What is the research base for the use of dietary supplements?' by Dr Mal Nesheim. Dr Nesheim was appointed by President Clinton to chair the US Commission on Dietary Supplement Labels, and his lucid article sets the stage for our understanding of the issues and needs in this area.

Both new studies and a thorough evaluation of the existing information are needed. The journal is currently soliciting and will be presenting up-to-date reviews of the scientific evidence of a causal association between intake of plants such as Echinacea, ginkgo, golden seal, St John's wart, ginseng and various health outcomes – both positive and negative. We invite you to propose and submit review articles for this series, and to engage in the discussion of this topic.

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