

History of medicinal plants

Prehistory

The use of plants as medicines predates written human history. Archaeological evidence indicates that humans were using medicinal plants during the Paleolithic, approximately 60,000 years ago. (Furthermore, other non-human primates are also known to ingest medicinal plants to treat illness)[4] Plant samples gathered from prehistoric burial sites have been thought to support the claim that Paleolithic people had knowledge of herbal medicine.

Ancient Egypt

In 1500 B.C. the ancient Egyptians wrote the text Ebers Papyrus, which contains lists of ailments and their treatments, ranging from "disease of the limbs" to "diseases of the skin" and has information on over 850 plant medicines, including garlic, juniper, cannabis, castor bean, aloe, and mandrake. Treatments were mainly aimed at ridding the patient of the most prevalent symptoms because the symptoms were largely regarded as the disease itself. Herbs used by Egyptian healers were mostly indigenous in origin, although some were imported from other regions like Lebanon. Other than papyri, evidence of herbal medicine has also been found in tomb illustrations or jars containing traces of herbs.

India

In India, Ayurveda medicine has used many herbs such as turmeric possibly as early as 1900 BC. Earliest Sanskrit writings such as the Rig Veda 1700-1100BC is the oldest recorded document regarding use of plants as medicine in India , and Atharva Veda (1500-1000BC) which described more plants and introduced basic concepts of ayurveda. Many other herbs and minerals used in Ayurveda were later described by ancient Indian herbalists such as Charaka and Sushruta during the 1st millennium BC. The Charaka samhita is believed to have arisen around 400-200 BCE, about 700 medicinal plants were described in this scripture. . The Sushruta Samhita another ayurvedic scripture attributed to Sushruta in the 6th century BC describes 700 medicinal plants, 64 preparations from mineral sources, and 57 preparations based on animal sources.

China

In China, medicinal herbs used for herbalism have been found in the archaeological sites of Bronze Age. The mythological Chinese emperor Shen Nung is said to have written the first Chinese pharmacopoeia, the "Pen Tsao". The "Pen Tsao" lists 365 medicinal plants and their uses - including Ephedra (the shrub that introduced the drug ephedrine to modern medicine), hemp, and chaulmoogra (one of the first effective treatments for leprosy). Succeeding generations augmented on the Pen Tsao, as in the Yaoxing Lun (Treatise on the Nature of Medicinal Herbs), a 7th-century Tang Dynasty treatise on herbal medicine.

Ancient Greece and Rome

The Hippocratic Corpus serves as a collection of texts which consist of around 60 early Ancient Greek medical works between sixth and fourth centuries BCE that are associated with the 'Father of Western Medicine', Hippocrates and his teachings. Though the actual authorship of some of these texts is disputed, each reflects the general ideals put forth by Hippocrates and his followers. The recipes and remedies included in parts of the Corpus no doubt reveal popular and prevalent treatments of the early ancient Greek period. The ingredients mentioned in the Corpus consist of a number of medicinal herbs, both local to Greece and imported from exotic locales such as Arabia.

Galen, a Greek physician practicing in Rome, was certainly prolific in his attempt to write down his knowledge on all things medical – and in his pursuit, he wrote many texts regarding herbs and their properties, most notably his “Works of Therapeutics”. In this text, Galen outlines the merging of each discipline within medicine that combine to restore health and prevent diseases.

Pliny was a Roman author, a naturalist, natural philosopher who wrote encyclopedic *Naturalis Historia* during AD 77, serves as a comprehensive guide to nature and also presents an extensive catalog of herbs valuable in medicine. With over 900 drugs and plants listed, Pliny's writings provide a very large knowledge base upon which we may learn more about ancient herbalism and medical practices.[23] Pliny himself referred to ailments as "the greatest of all the operations of nature," and the act of treatment via drugs as impacting the "state of peace or of war which exists between the various departments of nature".

Pedanius Dioscorides Greek physician constructed a pharmacopeia (Greek encyclopedia), “*De Materia Medica*” between 50 and 70 AD consisting of over 1000 medicines produced from herbs, minerals, and animals. The remedies that comprise this work were widely utilized throughout the ancient period and Dioscorides remained the greatest expert on drugs for over 1,600 years.