

Medicinal Plants in Tropical Countries

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Introduction

According to estimates of the World Health Organization, 80% of the world population is primarily reliant on traditional methods of healing which use empirical knowledge based on the use of medicinal plants. In many rural areas in developing countries there are no alternatives to traditional methods of healing, as neither the financial means nor the infrastructure is in place to allow the use of imported pharmaceuticals.

Pharmaceutical and pharmacological studies of many of the commonly used plants have already been undertaken. However, insufficient data fulfilling the criteria of evidence-based medicine are available regarding the efficacy and side effects of the treatment of disease with medicinal plants. The result is that medical practitioners trained in modern Western medicine mistrust their widespread use in rural areas. These monographs aim to overcome this contradiction – of common usage on the one hand and lack of knowledge on the other – by presenting the necessary information and a critical analysis of 25 important medicinal plants.

The plants described here were chosen from a list of 4776 medicinal plants which are predominantly used in Africa. Fifty-four of these plants have been described in ethnopharmacological reports from five or more African countries, and from this list 25 of the most frequently reported plants were chosen for this collection.

An assessment of the state of knowledge regarding the individual plants in each monograph is indicated with between no and four asterisks, as follows:

- * **Experimental investigations or studies of the plant chemistry recorded in ethnopharmacological reports indicate the efficacy of the described application.**
- ** **In addition, there is evidence indicating that a risk of extreme toxicity is absent.**
- *** **In addition, clinical studies already exist confirming the efficacy of the application.**
- **** **In addition, the application has already been recorded in medical books or official monographs such as pharmacopeias.**

The purpose of these monographs is to present a helpful summary of the often contradictory information on the use of medicinal plants in traditional medicine, in a way that is useful in the first instance to doctors, pharmacists, and other health practitioners in developing countries. In the first two introductory chapters we also hope to enable the reader to develop a better understanding of the significance of scientific investigations of traditional medicine in African countries.

Medicinal plants are often not taken seriously enough in the tropics. We sincerely hope that this publication will contribute to a more thoroughgoing debate on their usefulness. It should be seen as a report, not as a handbook of instruction for the use of the plants.

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