

INFORMATION YOU SHOULD KNOW!

INTENDED FOR LIFE-SPAN PROVIDERS

Herbalists for centuries have advocated the crude extract of a medicinal herb, rather than individual components, arguing with the use of such vague, unscientific concepts such as "synergy." Here is the 21st century rediscovery of this same "quite remarkable" ancient wisdom:

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Herbal medicines undergo UK trials--Crude extract, via synergy of components, works better than individual chemical components. Researchers amazed.

By BBC Science's Toby Murcott

Two herbal medicines are about to undergo clinical trials to determine their effectiveness in treating memory loss and pelvic pain in women.

The pelvic pain drug is based on three indigenous Chinese plants.

Extracts from sage are being used in the memory loss drug researchers hope will be useful in the treatment of Alzheimer's.

Western scientists have traditionally been quite skeptical about the effectiveness of herbal remedies.

But a team from Oxford Natural Products Plc and Oxford University said attitudes were changing.

Purified Compounds

"Ours is the first randomized controlled trial in the West of a traditional Chinese medicine product to treat painful periods," Dr Stephen Kennedy, a gynecologist at Oxford University, told the British Association's Festival of Science.

Eighty women will be recruited for the trial. The plants are being grown at a site in Beijing enabling Oxford Natural Products to guarantee the quality and origin of the plants and their extracts.

Professor John Wilkinson of Middlesex University is using traditional herbs, robotic systems and computer technology to test the effects of thousands of different plant extracts.

His team has tested purified compounds from sage extract to see if they inhibit an enzyme called acetylcholinesterase. The amount of the enzyme in the brain is thought to be linked to memory loss in Alzheimer's disease.

- *The scientists have found that using the whole extract is more effective than isolating the active molecules in it.*

'Quite remarkable'

"There are significant synergy effects in plant extracts and therefore it is justifiable in some circumstances to use the crude plant extract rather than a single purified chemical for drug development," said Professor Wilkinson.

He does not yet know exactly how this synergy operates but he said that many apparently inert chemicals were involved.

- *"We've found some components in the extract are inactive. When they're in the plant they're actually enhancing the effect of other active agents by as much as 60 to 80%. This is quite remarkable."*

Professor Wilkinson believes that this might be the reason why herbal remedies can have fewer side effects than the equivalent modern pharmaceuticals.