

Foreword

This edition of the journal *Public Health Nutrition* is a compilation of articles designed to provide the Public Health Professionals with an unbiased, thorough and up to date overview and evaluation of the scientific literature on the safety and efficacy of specific medicinal herbs currently used widely in the Western world. The preparation of this was based on two concerns; one that the public is turning less and less to health professionals for advice on their self-subscription of herbs, and the other is that the information being widely distributed is not based on scientific critical evaluations of peer reviewed literature on reliably conducted studies. Without a doubt, use of medicinal herbs has become very widespread, frequencies of use and amounts being used are extremely diverse, and there has been little concern about potential health risks because of the impression that if it is natural it must be safe.

We have identified and recruited the world experts from various countries in this field to provide through overviews and present their summaries and evaluations of these products. A meeting was held in Chapel Hill, North Carolina in March 2000 during which these evaluations

were publicly presented. Videotapes of all of the presentations at that meeting are available¹. This monograph provides the written manuscripts from those presentations that were completed, subjected to peer-review and accepted by their peers.

A theme, which arose at the meeting on Safety and Efficacy of Medicinal Herbs, was 'absolute proof of safety, reasonable proof of efficacy'. A brief summary of efficacy and safety of those herbs discussed at the meeting based upon the presentations and conclusions of the authors is presented in table one. It is evident that few cases have met both of these criteria, even for these very popular herbal products.

The public deserves to be informed of the actual level of our knowledge, or lack of it, on both of these points. This is an attempt to fill the gap and provide professionals a reliable resource for this purpose. It is a beginning, and should be continued, extended to other medicinal herbs and updated as new and significant information accrues.

Lenore Arab
Special Issue Editor

Table 1 Summary of efficacy and safety of featured herbs.

Medicinal Herb	Safety	Efficacy
Saw Palmetto	Mild and infrequent side effects	Efficacy proven short term, not long term caused by lack of data
St Johns Wort	No serious adverse side effects GI symptoms Photosensitivity at high doses, Reports of mania Drug interactions	Promising
Ginseng	GI symptoms Nervousness Confusion, Depression at high doses Neonatal effects Drug interactions	Unproven
Ginkgo Biloba	No serious adverse side effects reported	Demonstrated for Dementia No Effect in Healthy Subjects
Comfrey	Proven hepatotoxic	Unproven
Garlic	No serious adverse effects at normal doses	Unproven for Supplements
Echinacea	Anaphylactic reactions Rash Itchiness Dizziness Drop in Blood Pressure Potential Drug Interactions	Promising, for some preparations and forms of administration in reducing the duration of illness

¹The video tapes are available from the Institute of Nutrition from Dr. John B. Longenecker, Director UNC Institute of Nutrition, P.O. Box 2435, Chapel Hill, NC 27515 or email jlongene@email.unc.edu