

Conference report: 2013 New Zealand Association of Medical Herbalists conference

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The 2013 New Zealand Association of Medical Herbalists conference was held in Dunedin on May 24-26. Approximately 120 attendees met to discuss the latest developments in herbal medicine and naturopathy, with the forward-looking conference theme “future medicine from traditional herbs”.

I was invited to speak, on Day One of the conference, on insights from research into the integration of complementary therapies in primary care and how practitioners could harness increased interest amongst patients and practitioners to play a greater role in primary care. I also spoke about evidence-based medicine in practice and how only by truly valuing the underlying principles and philosophies of traditional medicine practice can this be fully achieved. I was honoured to speak amongst such a remarkable set of presenters.

The conference theme’s merger of traditional and future brought the proceedings underway, with Scottish bagpipes (in celebration of the southern city’s Scottish

heritage) and a traditional Māori karikia on Day One.

Robert McGowan (or Paa to many) gave an insightful speech on Rongua Māori (traditional Māori medicine) and the extraordinary depth and complexity of this ancient system of medicine. Herbal medicine traditionally could not be separated from the environment or intent with which it was grown and collected and many participants were fortunate enough to accompany Paa on field trips to Orokonui Ecosanctuary and the Dunedin Botanic Gardens, where he was able to teach many more things about this extraordinary system of medicine. I was even more impressed at the incorporation of many native plants into contemporary herbal practice in New Zealand. My favourite clinical pearl came from Moana Hutana who described her successful use of antimicrobial Horopito (*Pseudowintera* spp.) as an infusion to relieve oral thrush in patients undergoing chemotherapy.

Isla Burgess discussed the importance of conservation of medicinal plants and introduced a rapid assessment tool



Picture 1: Delegates get ready to enjoy Phil Rasmussen’s talk on new research on Echinacea quality and safety (credit: Dale Farnsworth, www.productionplus.co.nz)

that could be incorporated into clinical practice to assist practitioners identify which herbs may be endangered. This was followed by a visit to Sandra Clair's production facilities for Artemis herbal medicines, a completely wild crafted range based on Swiss herbal medicine traditions. Sandra also conducts wild crafting trips to the Central Otago highlands and discussed the many highlights of these trips and the advantages of wild crafting in herbal medicine practice.

Helen Mayhew changed the direction of the conference to discuss the controversial topic of shamanic plant medicine and the use of herbal medicines for psycho-spiritual healing. For most herbalists their contact with this form of medicine may come from patients using these plants without supervision, but their medicinal use is becoming topical in New Zealand, with several medical clinics now offering *Tabananthe iboga* as a therapeutic agent in heroin addiction.

Dr Rosemary Beresford from the University of Otago concluded Day One and spoke about the folkloric herbal medicine traditions of pharmacy and the danger of pharmacy practice ignoring traditional knowledge in its appropriation of herbal medicines. After her speech, the conference dinner brought much fun, laughter and networking. Ideas for growing the herbal medicine profession in New Zealand and beyond flowed as freely as the local wine and quite a few of them were even remembered long enough to be discussed at the AGM the next day.

Alicia Melrose began the proceedings on Day Two with an overview of herbal medicine and integrative options in the growing epidemic of depression. She was followed by Valmai Becker, who outlined the journey of developing a working herbal medicine farm and factory from scrub on the Banks Peninsula. Valmai runs intensive courses on traditional herbal medicine preparation for naturopathic students in New Zealand wishing to develop their herbalist knowledge and encouraged an interactive and hands-on session as the audience sampled a few finished products and helped create some of their own.

Phil Rasmussen discussed safety and quality issues around Echinacea, highlighting the importance of knowing where herbal medicines are coming from and how they are prepared. Phil also discussed the recent European controversy surrounding Echinacea use in children and the steps now necessary to reincorporate this important aspect of clinical practice.

My presentation on respecting evidence and respecting tradition was the final presentation of the conference, after which the conference transitioned to an AGM of the New Zealand Herbalists Association. Though smaller than the Australian practitioner community, the New Zealand practitioner community makes up for it with passion, enthusiasm and drive to push the profession forward. During the meeting it struck me how much the New Zealand practitioner community and the Australian

practitioner community share in common. There is much we can learn from each other and much we can do to assist each other in combating shared challenges. Practitioner communities in both nations can only be strengthened through a closer working relationship.

I would like to thank everyone at the New Zealand conference for making me feel so welcome during my stay in Dunedin. But I would particularly like to thank Linda Jones, Mary Allan and Moana Hutana who were particularly active in helping me make my arrangements and in the smooth running of the conference. I would like to extend a heartfelt thanks to the entire New Zealand herbal medicine community for their support.

The 2014 conference will be held in the Auckland region and I would encourage any Australian naturopath or herbalist to make the trip. For those wishing to make more of their New Zealand experience, such a trip could be complemented with some of the excellent opportunities to learn more about herbal preparation, Māori medicine or wild crafting. We don't connect with our brothers and sisters across the ditch anywhere near as much as we should and a family reunion is long overdue.



Picture 2: Paa educates the park ranger and conference delegates on the traditional use of New Zealand native plants during the field excursion to Orokonui Ecosanctuary



Picture 3: Isla Burgess workshops sustainability issues in herbal medicine with conference delegates (credit: Dale Farnsworth, www.productionplus.co.nz)