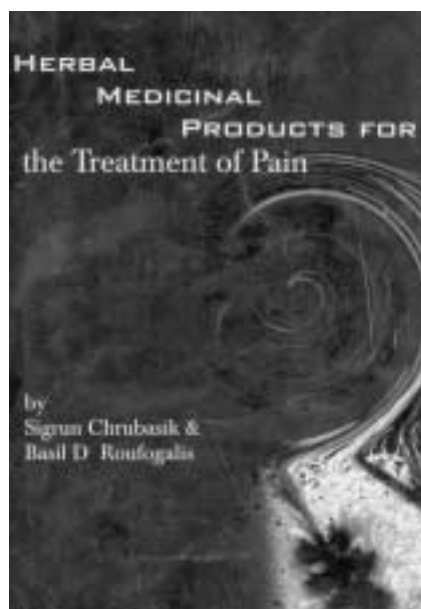




Herbal Medicinal Products for the Treatment of Pain

Edited by Sigrun Chrubasik and Basil Roufogalis. Published by Southern Cross University Press, Lismore, Australia. 184 pp.

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Pain is one of the most persistent and stubborn concurrents of chronic disease. It is a relentless tormentor against which numerous drugs have been developed, unfortunately with little success. The problematic areas of treatment are mainly rheumatic diseases. The problem lies both in the chronicity of pain and in the potential severity of side effects of the non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs used to alleviate the pain. Other examples of therapeutically problematic painful conditions are chronic migraine headaches.

It appears that as a result of considerable disappointment with the conventional means of therapy, along with concern over the possible side effects of long-term analgesic/anti-inflammatory treatment, patients struggling with these

diseases (as well as various other conditions) have begun to turn to alternative paths of therapy. Over the last ten years an increasing number of people have turned to alternative (or complementary) medicine, seeking relief for a wide variety of complaints (including overweight).

One of the most controversial alternative therapeutic practices is the use of medicinal herbs. In the Far East the use of medicinal herbs is widespread (and it includes the use of animal as well as vegetal ingredients). Most of these herbal medications have been in use for thousands of years in their countries of origin. However, lack of scientific-pharmacologic data, as well as reports of severe complications following the use of certain herbal products (for example, renal failure following ingestion of an aristolochic acid-containing herbal product used in a weight-reducing regimen) have severely curtailed the use of herbal medications in the west. Some research has been conducted thus far in this domain, but the existing information is scarce and insufficient to provide a solid base for clinical decision making.

A beacon in the area of pain therapy with herbal medicines is the book *Herbal Medicinal Products for the Treatment of Pain*, edited by Professors Sigrun Chrubasik and Basil Roufogalis of the Faculty of Pharmacy, at the University of Sidney, Australia. The book originated at a meeting of the Special Interest Group on Rheumatic Pain of the International Association for the Study of Pain, which took place in Germany in 1999. It brings together much of the existing pharma-

cologic data on herbal medicines used specifically in the treatment of rheumatic pain, migraine headache and mild depression. The book is the result of multinational collaboration, with contributions by medical doctors and pharmacologists from France, Germany, Israel and Australia, and it is divided into four main sections: 1) general aspects of the mechanisms of action; 2) pharmacology and quality requirements for clinical studies; 3) phyto-anti-inflammatory drugs for oral and external use; and 4) phyto-anti-migraine and phyto-anti-depressant drugs. The editors present both clinical studies and basic research, with all data depicted by graphs and diagrams. Many of the chapters provide detailed information on the mechanism of action (on a molecular basis), interactions and side effects of the herbal products investigated.

An important issue is discussed in the first chapter of the book – namely the scientific requirements for studying herbal medicines, as well as the problems encountered when working with complex natural compounds as opposed to pure chemicals.

Although most of the book's contents are of a very basic biochemical/pharmacologic nature, and as such, perhaps somewhat unpalatable to the general medical public, it provides a useful guide to the use of existing analgesic herbal medicines. Hopefully, it shall also prove an incentive for further pharmacologic research in the field of medicinal herbs.

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