

Monthly column (June)
SOAP, PERFUMERY & COSMETICS

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A trip to sunny Vienna

Dedicated to the search for the latest botanical information, I dragged myself off to Vienna to attend the Clinical Dermatology Conference 2000, where for the first year they had included a section on Complementary Medicine. My old friend Gerry Bodeker from Churchill Hospital, Oxford was responsible for this new event and had invited a number of interesting speakers.

The opening lecture from Dr. Bodeker showed that the use of complementary medicine was increasing in the UK and that this field of treatment was gaining importance in the eyes of the patient (mainly female). Doctors were nervous that they did not have as full an understanding as they would have liked of these complementary or sometimes alternative therapies. The move from the Medicines Control Agency and from their European counterparts was both positive and progressive and there would probably be a new category created for this area of complementary medicine.

I must say that this relatively new idea of giving a 15-minute presentation with 5 minutes of questions is a challenge for somebody who speaks quite slowly, and as a result I finished on my knees and totally out of breath at 16 minutes and 27 seconds. As somebody said to me later, I could have said less more slowly!

Dr. Matthias Augustin gave a review of some work carried out on the treatment of psoriasis using various plant species including that of *Mahonia* a rich source of berberine, which he compared to the normal treatment dithranol. The final analysis gave dithranol the winning set of results, but the plant alternative had a number of interesting advantages that made it a close contender.

Dr. Amala Raman gave a fascinating paper on the treatment of vitiligo and some new information on the treatment of psoriasis. The mystery ingredient mentioned in her paper of a year or so ago (when it was too secret to reveal the details) turned out to be Black Pepper or *Piper nigrum*, where one of the active materials was identified as piperine. This material was discovered by painstakingly screening down a comprehensive list of ethnopharmaceutical remedies using *in vitro* techniques to assess their efficacy.

For the fifth time this year I had the pleasure of sharing a conference with Dr. Pierfrancesco Morganti who gave an excellent overview of acne and suggested a treatment based on soya phospholipids rich in linoleic acid contained in a glycolic acid base.

The afternoon was concluded by a stimulating paper from Dr. Debbie Shaw from the Medical Toxicology Unit at Guy's and St. Thomas' Hospital, who is working closely with Kew Gardens (Christine Leon) to look at the safety issues of traditional medicines used for skin conditions. All of these remedies are potentially valuable, but only if they are correctly identified and correctly prescribed. The springing up of Chinese Medicine Centres all over the country gives cause for concern if the people running and prescribing those herbal materials do not have the minimum of seven years training demanded to make a qualified Chinese Herbal practitioner.

In the evening we had been invited to the Rathaus (City Hall) for a speakers' dinner. It was a grand occasion in the armourial room where the coats of arms of the nine districts of Vienna are kept. It was also an opportunity to meet up with a number of other dermatologists who had been speaking at the conference, but because there had been eight parallel sessions, it had been impossible to attend their lectures. I had agreed to meet one of my fellow speakers at this event and all through the speeches, the dinner and the wonderful Viennese music, I kept looking out for him without success. Just about the time we were planning to leave I saw him enter the hall looking somewhat embarrassed, evidently he had just spent the entire evening with a group of nutritionalists who were also having their conference in Vienna and had also had their speakers' dinner in an adjacent hall!

I went on the trail of Maria Theresa (1717-1780) who apart from being the only Austrian Empress was also the Queen of Hungary and Bohemia at the same time. She was responsible for laying out the herbal garden in 1754 for medicinal purposes at the Schönbrunn Palace Park. She later (in 1757) gave this garden to the University of Vienna and it is now a botanic gardens.

Very little remains of the original physic garden, but in amongst the Cotoneasters, Cornus and various species cultivated for their beauty rather than their pharmacy one finds a magnificent *Ginkgo biloba*, resplendent with crinkly fan-shaped leaves and clearly very old (could it have been a part of the original gardens?). Had the oriental use of Ginkgo as a mental enhancer in older people or its healing properties been known to the Austrians of this period?

Further on there was an English Oak of considerable proportions - *Quercus robur*, a rich source of astringent tannins, useful not only for diarrhoea, but also for the anti-inflammatory effect on mucosa, burns haemorrhoids and chilblains – which would certainly have been common knowledge in those days.

The presence of three Catalpa trees or Qui Qui Hua Pi (*Catalpa kaempferi*) looked a little too contemporary and it is doubted that the 18th century apothecaries of this period would have known much of the unusual use of this plant by the Japanese geisha for causing vaginal contraction or for the use of the plant in cases of asthma.

Sadly the botanic garden was a little neglected, perhaps the zoo next door was more interesting and more profitable.