

Christoph Tschupp, *Johanniskraut: Hypericum perforatum L. vom Hexenkraut zum modernen Arzneimittel*, Schweizerischen Gesellschaft für Geschichte der Pharmazie, vol 26, Liebefeld, SGGP/SSHP, 2004, pp. viii, 552, illus., €35.00, Sw Fr 49.00 (paperback 3-9522758-4-0).

Paracelsus called the herb *Perforata* and everyone knew what he was talking about. In popular belief *Hypericum perforatum* L. (St John's Wort) (HP) was the healing, anti-magic and magic plant received from God, which so infuriated the devil that he bit holes in the leaves. By making a small hole in a sprig and looking through it, one could observe all the witches present at a Roman Catholic service. These are a few tricks from sagas and legends I do not find in the book discussed here. However, in his dissertation—accomplished under the supervision of Professor F Ledermann—the author has provided an impressive quantity of information on HP as a medicine in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In Hippocrates' work we find the first written indications on the use of the plant for sciatica, inflammations and pus formation. Pliny the Elder gave a clear description of the plant and Dioscorides mentions four species, the second of which, *Askyron*, corresponds to the plant discussed here. The herb was also believed to protect against witches and the devil, and that is why it was attached to stables and houses. Hildegard von Bingen could not appreciate the herb and thought it was of no importance to medicine. The oil made from the flowers was listed in the first *Pharmacopoeia Londinensis* (1618). Later, the use of the plant against vesical stones and for the healing of wounds passed into oblivion until it experienced a real revival as an antidepressant.

As a natural, healthy, inexpensive and over-the-counter “happy pill”, HP seems the dream remedy against depression, a kind of vegetable Prozac. The antidepressant effect of the plant, which has now been definitively proved, was indeed the main target of clinical and toxicological research and made it possible to include it in the arsenal of reliable drugs. Tschupp gives an extensive account of this. He is not an alchemist

who can turn lead into gold and therefore documents everything thoroughly. The result of his study is a book full of information on this miracle plant, complete with many lists and tables. The etymology, pharmacodynamics, structure of the active constituents—everything is dealt with.

The book is mainly oriented towards Swiss and German publications. Most of the research has indeed been carried out in Europe. Of the ninety-one notes on interactions (pp. 410–26) only six are related to English-speaking researchers and their names are not included in the bibliography (Moore, Kliever, Johnne, Lantz).

In contrast to their Swiss and German colleagues, American physicians remain sceptical about medication with HP. Richard Shelton (Vanderbilt University) (2001), who carried out a survey with 200 patients during eight weeks, found that hypericum extract did not have a better result than a placebo in major depression. German clinical research has shown, however, that the effect of HP preparations is comparable to that of tricyclic antidepressants in certain patient groups with minor to moderate depression. The effect is based on the inhibition of monoamine oxidase (MAO) and catechol-O-methyltransferase (COMT). These enzymes are involved in the catabolism of various neurotransmitters, such as dopamine, noradrenaline and serotonin. However, a serious drawback of HP medication has come to the fore: an important shortcoming is its interaction with other drugs. One of the secondary metabolites, hyperforin, can activate important liver enzymes to make toxic substances as unharmed as possible before they enter the blood circulation. The effect of other drugs, such as contraceptives, HIV inhibitors, anticoagulants, anti-epileptics and chemotherapy, may be decreased or prevented. Also reported are side-effects such as stomach irritation, loss of appetite, tiredness, hypersensitivity to light and allergic reactions. Due to its MAO-inhibiting property the use of tyrosine-containing foods is not recommended.

This book can be wholeheartedly recommended to every physician, pharmacist or

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phytotherapist who wants to be informed about this peculiar herb. I am looking forward with interest to further monographs by Tschupp.

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Briony Hudson (ed.), *English delftware drug jars: the collection of the museum of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain*, London and Chicago, Pharmaceutical Press, 2006, pp. 271, 220 colour plates, £95.00 (hardback 0-85369-643-8).

The Royal Pharmaceutical Society holds one of the largest and finest collections of English delftware drug jars in Britain, second in size only to the holdings of the Thackray Museum in Leeds. Most of the jars in the collection are labelled seventeenth and eighteenth century wet or dry drug jars, in addition to which they hold several pill tiles, barbers bowls, and simpler pots and jars. The jars can be seen by visitors to the Society's museum at its headquarters in Lambeth, but before this publication there was no published guide to its holdings.

The catalogue provides a very detailed and excellently illustrated account of its contents. Each drug jar in the collection is illustrated in colour and the description goes beyond the normal limits in offering a translation of the drug jar's label and a contemporary description of its ingredients and applications (mostly from John Quincy's 1718 *Dispensatory*). It is also notable that the catalogue includes a sensible and concise summary of current knowledge about the production and design of drug jars by Bill Jackson, which will be particularly welcome given the relative rarity of the classic accounts of medical delftware by G E Howard and R E A Drey. By its nature, no catalogue can provide the answer to some of the unanswered questions that surround these jars—why they were made, who bought them, and how they relate to changes in medicine and pharmacy in this period—but this provides an important source for those interested in these problems, and the quality of the scholarship and high production values mean it should stand as an essential reference work for historians for a long time to come.

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