

Formulas are Herbs in Harmony

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"It has become vital to educate the medical and scientific establishment and show that there are some features which are unique to phytotherapy and which contribute both to efficacy and safety. One of these is the concept of synergy, in that a plant extract is more than the sum of its parts, ... This is already accepted by patients and practitioners, but we now have an opportunity through further testing to prove that it is a true phenomenon which should be appreciated and utilised for therapeutic benefits".

--Dr Elizabeth M Williamson, 'Synergy: Interactions within Herbal Medicines'

European, traditional Chinese medicine and Ayurveda generally believe through practice and experience that synergy between herbs is happening and is a central part of their philosophy. This synergy is the harmony created by the individual as part of an orchestra or a team. Formulations of herbs are normal and may be either historical formulations, which have been developed by empirical observation or are custom-designed for an individual patient. Science may not have the tools yet to confirm the super-subtle synergistic interactions and increased efficacy of ancient formulation practices. A recent case in point occurred at the London Royal Free Hospital England in the early 1990's. During trials to study a Chinese herbal formula for eczema, researchers were astonished when the addition of 'one extra herb' was added to a formula containing 10 herbs. It resulted in a dramatic improvement in previously unresponsive patients.

According to Dr. Williamson of the School of Pharmacy University of London, England "The approach taken by herbalists to skin disorders such as eczema differs radically from conventional treatment, which usually involves topical application of corticosteroids with their inherent disadvantages, and may lead eventually to the use of cytotoxics in refractory cases. In contrast, the multi-targeted approach of the herbalist must surely be preferable, and the Chinese herbal remedy containing multiple ingredients used to treat eczema is a good example of this." She also goes on to say there are several reasons holding science back from the study of formulation synergy, "the main one being the difficulty of proving such effects, since to do so would necessitate the testing of each individual constituent and comparing the activity with an equivalent dose in the mixture. This is an immense undertaking and prohibitively expensive in terms of time and money." Also, the present methodology for investigating botanicals is flawed: "If a combination of substances is needed for the effect, then the bioassay-led method of investigation, narrowing activity down firstly to a fraction and eventually a compound, is doomed to failure, and this has led to the suggestion that the plants are in fact devoid of activity."

The mechanism of action of most herbs is still unknown as yet to science due to expense, and present methodologies yet there are 'proven' instances where a total herb formulas work better than an equivalent dose of an isolated compound, for which we have no real rationale.

In a study published in the *International Journal of Oncology*, PC-SPES, an herbal mixture used by prostate cancer patients as an alternative form of treatment, was investigated; previous published studies have shown this formula to be effective for prostate cancer. Since PC-SPES is derived from eight individual herbs, each with distinct as well as overlapping properties. this study investigated whether a particular herb in the

