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Interview with Melanie Johns Cupp

(*Dr Melanie Johns Cupp is one of the foremost experts in Toxicology of Herbal Products. We as forensic toxicologists became interested in her and her work, largely because of her book on Herbal toxicology she wrote (Toxicology and Clinical Pharmacology of Herbal Products, Humana Press, 2000). This book was reviewed by Gyan Fernando of UK, in Vol. 3, No. 2 in the Technical Books Section.*

We at the "Anil Aggrawal's Internet Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology" approached her for an online interview and she graciously agreed. The interview was conducted for well over two months. Some excerpts.. ..)

Qu. 1. Is this (Toxicology and Clinical Pharmacology of Herbal Products) your first book? What are your future projects/books?

Ans. Toxicology and Clinical Pharmacology of Herbal Products was my first book. Dietary Supplements: Toxicology and Clinical Pharmacology was just published in December. I am currently working on a 2nd edition of Toxicology and Clinical Pharmacology of Herbal Products.

SOME PREVIOUS INTERVIEWS

Some of the most popular previous interviews with famous authors:

- Heather Pringle, author of the best selling *The Mummy Congress - Science, Obsession, and the everlasting dead*, (Theia Books, An imprint of Hyperion, 2001) [Vol 2, No. 2 : July - December 2001]
- Jay Levinson, author of the best selling *Questioned Documents: A Lawyer's Handbook*, (Academic Press, 2001) [Vol 3, No. 1 : January - June 2002]
- Margaret Stark, author of the best selling *A Physician's Guide to Clinical Forensic Medicine*, (Humana Press, 2000) [Vol 3, No. 2 : July - December 2002]
- G.I.Brown, author of the best selling *The Big Bang - A History of Explosives*, (Sutton Publishing Ltd., 2001) [Vol 4, No. 1 : January - June 2003]

Qu. 2. What is your next book about? Does it have anything to do with toxicology/herbal products?

Ans. Dietary Supplements: Toxicology and Clinical Pharmacology covers non- herbal supplements. Examples include huperzine, glucosamine, chondroitin, and dehydroepiandrosterone. Some people might call these products "nutraceuticals." Although most of these products have a plant origin, they differ from herbal products. One difference is that herbal products usually contain a plant part (root, leaf, etc) and all of its myriad chemical constituents, while non-herbal supplements usually

contain only a single active ingredient, much like a pharmaceutical product. This makes the pharmacological and toxicological effects of non-herbal supplements easier to study; you don't have to sort out the contributions of each individual component. Another difference is that while herbal products have been in use for hundreds or even thousands of years, non- herbal supplements are relatively new, so there is less experience with their use, and also in some cases less scientific information.

Qu. 3. Can you tell us about your career? Your educational background?

Ans. I received both a B.S. in pharmacy and a doctor of pharmacy from the West Virginia University (WVU) School of Pharmacy, and completed a residency in hospital pharmacy practice at West Virginia University Hospitals Department of Pharmaceutical Services. I have been a drug information specialist at the WV Drug Information Center for over seven years. I also have my own web site www.AskAboutMeds.com, where people can ask medication or dietary supplement questions for a fee.

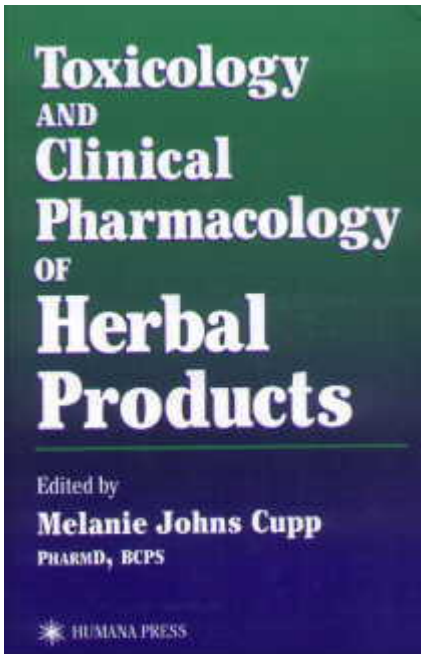
Qu. 4. Tell us about West Virginia. You seem to have spent a lot of time there.

Ans. I was born in West Virginia, and have spent my life here. It has an undeserved reputation for being "backward." When many people hear the words "West Virginia" or "Appalachia" they think of barefoot hillbillies with poor hygiene. West Virginia is a beautiful state with friendly, sincere, hardworking people. It is also not devoid of scientific and technological advances. For example, West Virginia University has the only undergraduate forensic identification program in the nation, and students at West Virginia University have used a monorail system (called the personal rapid transit or PRT) for traveling from one part of campus to another for over thirty years. I often meet people who don't even realize that West Virginia is a state separate from Virginia. When they find out that I am from West Virginia they will say something in reference to Richmond or another city in Virginia. My husband says that instead of getting angry I should be happy that people are so uninformed, because it would soon get very crowded here if people knew what a great place it is to live and work.

Qu. 5. Any fascinating experiences related to your book topics?

Ans. I am amazed at how herbal products and dietary supplements is almost a religion to some people-both the lay pubic and health care professionals. People have asked me, "Don't you believe in alternative medicine?" or they have looked at the title of my book and said, "I don't believe in that stuff." I try to explain that it is not a matter of belief, but rather a matter of evidence. My books present the scientific evidence available for these products. I am not trying to promote the products, nor steer people away from them.

Jacket Cover of "Toxicology and Clinical Pharmacology of Herbal Products" by Melanie Johns Cupp, published by Humana Press. Click on the book to go to its review.



Qu. 6. What do you wish you could change?

Ans. I wish I could get people to stop looking at medicine as being "traditional" vs "alternative" or "complimentary." There is medicine that works and medicine that doesn't work. These are the only two categories we should have. For example, I know of physicians who advertise that they "incorporate alternative medicine for a holistic approach to care." That is fine as long as there is evidence that these medicines or techniques work. But if that evidence exists, everyone should be using them.

Qu. 7. What is your favorite TV show?

Ans. My husband and I like to watch CSI (Crime Scene Investigation). It is a hugely popular show in the U.S. It is heartening to see science and scientists portrayed in a way that is interesting and appealing to young people. The characters on the show are quirky, but not "nerdy." A drawback of the show is that the general public cannot separate what is real science from what is not. If the public believes that the show reflects the state-of-the-art of real-life forensic investigations, the show will unfortunately raise public expectations of forensic professionals, much as medical dramas have done to physicians. I would like to see an episode of CSI that involves a crime related to an herbal product or other dietary supplement.

Qu. 8. Any awards?

Ans. I received the sophomore organic chemistry award in college. Toxicology and Clinical Pharmacology of Herbal Products was named one of the top 250 health sciences books (out of over 3000 reviewed) by Doody's Health Sciences Book Review Journal.

Qu. 9. If a youngster of about 12-13 years wanted to take up pharmacy or other health profession/ writing/science as a career, how should he proceed?

Ans. Young people interested in science or health professions should take all of the math and science courses available to them, but they should also work on their writing skills. Written communication is important in science and health professions even if you are not planning on writing a book or spending a lot of time publishing. They should also speak with as many scientists, health professionals, and science writers as possible to find out what they do, what parts of their

jobs they like and dislike, and what path they followed to get where they are. They also need to be honest with themselves about their own strengths, weaknesses, likes, and dislikes. They might find out a particular career that initially appealed to them is not what they want to do, and that is o.k.

Melanie Johns Cupp can be approached via E-mail at mjcupp@hsc.wvu.edu. The review of her book Toxicology and Clinical Pharmacology of Herbal Products *appears in Vol. 3, No. 2. Readers wanting to visit this review may want to the linked page (page008).*

Interview appearing in the previous issue Interview appearing in the next issue Interviews : Collective Index Interview with Anoop Chandola, in *Anil Aggrawal's Internet Journal of Book Reviews (sister publication)* (Volume 1, Number 2, July - December 2002)

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