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Book Reviews: Popular Books Section

A USEFUL REFERENCE BOOK

Guidelines for the Appropriate Use of Herbal Medicines , Paperback, 6" x 9.5".
World Health Organization Regional Office for the Western Pacific, Manila, Publication Date 1998, 79 pages, ISBN 92-9061-124-3: Price: Sw.fr. 7.50 (US $ 6.70) for developing countries Sw. fr. 5.20

WHO's Catalogue of Publications

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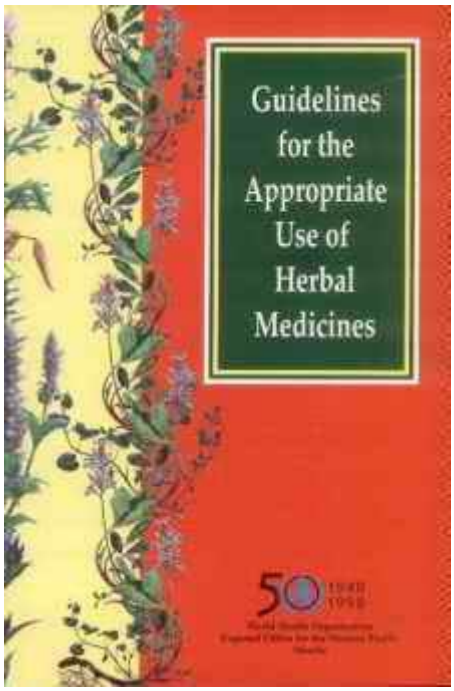
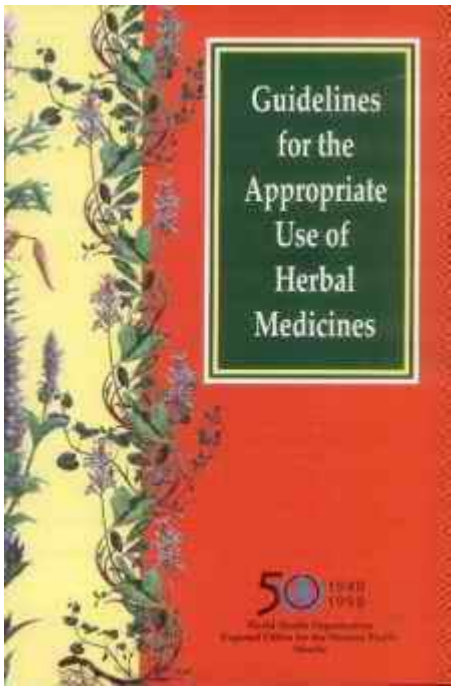


The World Health Organisation Regional Office for the Western Pacific, based in Manila has produced several books on medicinal plants of the region. These are reviewed on the next page of this journal.

This book is a book of guidelines for the appropriate use of Herbal Medicines.

SOME DEFINITIONS



Some definitions from Chapter 3 of this book:

& CHARACTERIZING COMPOUND OR MARKER: A natural constituent of a plant part that may be used to assure the identity or quality of a plant material or preparation, but is not necessarily responsible for the plant's biological or therapeutic activity.
& HERBAL MEDICINES: Plant-derived materials or products with therapeutic or other human health benefits which contain either raw or processed ingredients from one or more plants. In some traditions, materials of inorganic or animal origin may also be present, although for the purpose of this document, the focus will be on plant materials only.
Under this definition, there are three kinds of herbal medicines: raw plant materials, processed plant materials and medicinal herbal products. The definition does not apply where the active component has been identified, and either isolated or synthesized as a chemical component of a drug product.
& INGREDIENT: The substance in the herbal formulation which may not be a purified chemical component.
& MEDICINAL HERBAL PRODUCTS: Finished, labeled pharmaceutical products in dosage forms that contain one or more of the following: powdered plant materials, extracts, purified extracts, or partially purified active substances isolated from plant materials. Medicines containing plant material combined with chemically defined active substances, including chemically defined, isolated constituents of plants, are not considered to be herbal medicines.
& MEDICINAL PLANT: A plant which has been used for medical purposes at one time or another, and which, although not necessarily a product or available for marketing, is the original material of herbal medicines.
& PROCESSED PLANT MATERIALS: Plant materials treated according to traditional procedures to improve their safety and efficacy, to facilitate their clinical use, or to make medicinal preparations.
& RAW PLANT MATERIALS: Fresh or dry plant materials which are marketed whole or simply cut into small pieces.

Herbal medicine has been around for thousands of years and the majority of the world's population in developing countries still relies on herbal medicines. In recent times herbal medicines have attained popularity in the western world as well. Some like Gingko biloba and Aloe vera are now household names in the West.

Herbal medicines, however, are not necessarily safe simply because they are natural. Serious side effects such as carcinogenicity and hepatotoxicity are well known. There is therefore a need for quality control, standardisation and monitoring of interactions. This booklet lays down the guidelines for the appropriate use of herbal medicine.

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As the title implies this is not an encyclopaedic volume on herbal medicine but instead is a slim and concise booklet of guidelines.

Following the introductory chapter, chapter 2 lays down the Goals and Objectives of the Guidelines.

The goals are to promote appropriate use of herbal medicines and to encourage their integration into mainstream health services.

Chapter 3 is on definitions. The other chapters are *National Policy Development, Development of a National Programme on Herbal Medicines, Regulation of the Manufacture and Distribution of Medicinal Herbal Products, Regulation of Herbal Medicines* and finally, *Use of the Guidelines*.

This part of the booklet takes less than half the pages of the volume. Various appendices (see below) take up the rest.

The guidelines are not meant to be hard and fast rules and merely offers guidance, which may be adopted and modified by the member countries. All aspects of herbal medicines are looked at including the labelling requirements, for example, the inclusion of an expiry date and a batch number.

Annex 1 of the booklet reports on the meeting of the *Working Group on Herbal Medicines*, which was held in Manila in 1997.

This is followed by country reports from the member countries. These are *Australia, Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, Japan, Republic of Korea, People's Democratic Republic of Lao, Macao, Malaysia, Mongolia, New Zealand, Philippines, Singapore* and *Vietnam*.

Annex 2 lists contact details of the advisors from the different member countries. Annexes 3,4 and 5 report on the proceedings of the 1997 meeting.

Finally, there is a list of references.

This booklet of guidelines on Herbal Medicine should form a useful companion to the other WHO books on herbal plants from this region.

-Gyan Fernando
Dr Gyan C. A. Fernando is a native of Sri Lanka and is familiar with plants used in Ayurvedic remedies. He now works as a Forensic Pathologist in Devon, England.



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