Tradition and perspectives of Arab herbal medicine: a review

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Abstract

Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM), including herbal medicine, are popular in the general population worldwide. Parallel to the increasing interest in ‘modern’ CAM therapies and the historical importance of Arab medicine, there is also a similar trend in research activities dealing with the efficacy and safety of medicinal plants in our region. Historical and current studies and surveys indicate that the Eastern region of the Mediterranean has been distinguished throughout the generations with a rich inventory of natural medicinal herbs. It is well documented that indigenous Arab medicine has contributed greatly to the development of modern medicine in Europe and remains one of the closest forms of original European medicine. The rapid increase in consumption of herbal remedies worldwide has been stimulated by several factors, including the notion that all herbal products are safe and effective. This article presents a systematic review on traditional Arab medicine including historical background, medical innovations introduced by Arab physicians in the field of safety and efficacy of herbal medicine and a state-of-the-art description of traditional Arab herbal medicine in the Mediterranean region.
Traditional herbal medicines are naturally occurring, plant-derived substances with minimal or no industrial processing that have been used to treat illness within local or regional healing practices. The growing of herbs for medicine is fuelling and is to some extent fuelled by increasing scientific interest in herbal medicine. The World Health Organisation estimates that of the 35,000-70,000 species of plants that are used for medicinal purposes around the world, some 5,000 have been submitted for biomedical scrutiny. Scientific evidence of the efficacy of medicinal herbs is beginning to emerge from randomised, controlled trials in which herbs compare favourably with orthodox medicines. This article presents a systematic review on traditional Arab medicine including historical background, medical innovations introduced by Arab physicians in the field of safety and efficacy of herbal medicine and a state-of-the-art description of traditional Arab herbal medicine in the Mediterranean region.

For the classification of herbal or traditional medicinal products, factors applied in regulatory systems include: description in a pharmacopoeia monograph, prescription status, claim of a therapeutic effect, scheduled or regulated ingredients or substances, or periods of use. Some countries draw a distinction between "officially approved" products and "officially recognized" products, by which the latter products can be marketed without scientific assessment by the authority [2].