

## Preliminary results of ethnopharmacological information collected in the United Arab Emirates

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Ethnopharmacological information of plants has proven successful to drug discovery (Cox 1994). Preliminary documentation of the medicinal plants available in the United Arab Emirates as well as in the Arabian Peninsula has been compiled by several authors (Ghonemy 1993; Ghazanfar 1994). However, these reports contain insufficient details for rigorous scientific screening. To acquire information suitable for subsequent screening, a systematic investigation of locally used herbal medicine was initiated in early 1997.

The investigation included the background knowledge of the healers, the preparations used by local healers, and their functions and dosages. Particular attention was paid to possible side effects. Standard inquiry forms were prepared and used for all investigations. Samples of preparations were acquired from the healers whenever available. Plant specimens were collected from the field and samples of herbal remedies were also purchased from the local herbal drug stores.

Seventeen healers were interviewed over a three-month period contributing to 140 single or compound formulae. Data were computerized on an information retrieval system under development. Preliminary results on the categorization of the sources of herbal ingredients are shown in Table 1.

The results revealed that plant material comprised the majority of folk medicine. The plant material used was not restricted to native species; many non-native herbs, usually purchased from local herbal drug stores by the healers, were important ingredients. In addition, many preparations were of compound ingredients and most of the

preparations used aqueous infusion/decoction or direct oral administration without prior extraction, and none of the preparations used organic solvents which are frequently used in extraction of plant material by pharmaceutical manufactures. This indicates that the same methods used by healers should be considered for laboratory screening to verify the claimed efficacy of the preparations. These data were valuable for guiding subsequent screening of locally used herbal remedies.

Table 1. Categories of the sources of the ingredients in the preparations used by local healers.

Categories	Number of items	%
Plant materials from native species or widely cultivated species in the Arabian peninsula		
Within UAE	18	15.8
Except those within UAE	10	8.8
Plant materials from non-native species nor widely cultivated species in the Arabian peninsula	67	58.8
Sub-total of plant material	95	83.3
Non-plant material	19	16.7
Total	114	100

Cox P.A. (1994) *Ethnobotany and the Search for New Drugs*. 25-41

El-Ghonemy A.A. (1993) *Encyclopedia of Medicinal Plants of the United Arab Emirates*.

Ghazanfar SA (1994) *Handbook of Arabian medicinal plants*