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## 'Honey, I'm off to the Herbalist'

*by Sean Henderson*

Not a cry on the lips of many people in homes across this land – but ever more people are turning to herbal medicine, either self-prescribed, using over the counter remedies or, increasingly, going to a trained herbalist.

'Oh I love herbal medicine, I took this homeopathic remedy when my...' comes the triumphant announcement when I am chatting about my profession, so glad are people that they are able to connect with me in some way and show off their knowledge. This is when I break the news that homeopathy and herbal medicine are quite different, in a therapeutic sense.

So what is herbal medicine and what is it like to visit an herbalist?

In my first year at university, a patient came to the clinic; we'll call her Florence. Florence had digestive disturbances following her holiday swimming in the Lake District. For six months she had been unable to get any respite from diarrhoea, trapped wind, flatulence and intestinal pain. She had taken all the preparations at the chemist, antibiotics from the doctor, was eating well, and still it went on. Florence left the clinic with a small bottle of dark liquid with dosage instructions. Two weeks later she returned, her symptoms had gone and Florence was discharged as a patient. I was hooked on herbs before I began my University degree, but here was proof of its power in front of my eyes.

How did herbal medicine help Florence? The clinic director had given this patient a poison; she was given an herb with a reputation for many accidental deaths! The herb in question works on the central nervous system and is particularly effective on the intestinal musculature. It slowed down the action of the gut, reducing its movement. Why would this work when conventional medicine had failed? Florence had long since lost the infection with all the antibiotics given her. Her intestinal track was in spasm and could not return to normal function. In the hands of a qualified herbalist, the poisonous herb was able to give Florence's gut a break, then normal functioning came about naturally. Herbal medicine had a treatment strategy that general medicine would not have considered.

For another patient whom we'll call Martin, it was a different story. Martin came to me with a spinal condition and a whole series of stomach complaints. He suffered from Ankylosing Spondylitis, an inflammatory disorder of the spine. Martin came to seek help for irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), a very common condition, and high blood pressure. Herbal Medicine was able to give support to his digestive system, adrenals glands and heart. It also became clear that the medicines he was on for his Ankylosing Spondylitis were the main cause of his irritable bowel symptoms. With this information, he was able to return to his doctor and change his medication. The herbs brought his blood pressure down and relieved the IBS. The doctor changed his medication, taking him off blood pressure medication, and that in turn reduced his IBS. Martin was pleased that he was now on less medication and had fewer resulting side effects.

Herbal medicine is so much more than an old-fashioned approach to medicine; it is an holistic medicine, using whole plant extracts, and looks at the whole person to arrive at strategies for dealing with disease. It aims to use our bodies' natural ability to heal by restoring balance.

So next time you feel the sniffles, try reaching for the Peppermint tea rather than the paracetamol and see for yourself how herbal medicine can help. Many a cold and flu can be prevented by copious amounts of Peppermint when you get those first signs of an infection. Alternatively, try reaching for the healing properties of Marigold cream (sometimes called Calendula), perhaps with a drop or two of tea-tree oil in it, for bumps, bruises or scrapes.

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