

An Ethnopharmacological approach to screening plants traditionally used as medicines by Aboriginal people

Donna Savigni

dsavigni@cyllene.uwa.edu.au



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Background

There remains an ongoing, urgent need for new drugs to combat human diseases. Plants have been a prime source of highly effective conventional drugs.

The ethnopharmacological approach has been shown to be very successful. Aboriginal people maintain the oldest culture on Earth and have used plants as medicines for centuries.

It is important to ensure that the Traditional Knowledge is protected such that benefits flow to Aboriginal people.

Aims

To demonstrate how Western science can work with Aboriginal medicinal knowledge, with the goal of empowering Aboriginal communities both culturally and economically.

To use ethnomedical knowledge as a guide to identifying and developing plant compounds that may be useful in ameliorating or curing human diseases.



Methods

The Plants for People team and Aboriginal elders from several communities worked in partnership to study medicinal plants, document Traditional Knowledge about selected plants, and collect specimens for laboratory analysis.

Plant extracts were assessed for bioactivity using a range of laboratory procedures.

Discussion

This research was carried out at the request of several Aboriginal communities.

Traditional Knowledge has been documented in a way so as to protect the community's intellectual property rights.

When the community were happy with the confidentiality agreements and trusted the researchers, they authorised the laboratory work to proceed.

Those plant extracts showing bioactivity in laboratory testing were discussed with the community and views were sought on commercialisation.



Reflections

For a graduate student the process of ethnopharmacological research can be frustrating at times.

The need to work at a pace consistent with the community's desire, the requirement for absolute confidentiality and the associated publishing constraints are almost entirely at odds with normal scientific endeavour.

However, these restrictions are alleviated by the knowledge that a successful outcome will have a huge impact on empowering Aboriginal communities, both culturally and economically.