Pills or Plants

Peyton Schrag
Department of Biology
Lake Forest College
Lake Forest, Illinois 60045

Remembering to take your pills every day would be so much easier if you could just pronounce those stupid names pharmacists glue to the front of your bottle. Nowadays, it seems you need ten years of schooling just to know the purpose of the drug and five more to know its composition. It is as though people are restricted from the knowledge that lies behind the pharmacy counter. But after an internship in Costa Rica, I realized that not all medicine requires this level of ignorance. Thanks to the Grace Groner program, I learned about an entirely different side of medicine called natural medicine that allowed me to explore what happens on the other side. After my two months there, I began to reevaluate the chemicals that we call medicine here in the U.S.

Over the past seventy years, we have seen a dramatic increase in the pharmaceutical industry, accompanied by the decline in the use and knowledge of medicinal plants. Nevertheless, many places around the world continue to use and prefer these plants over synthetic pills. Costa Rica, being one of these places, has thousands of different plant species available to those that live there. During my internship, I learned that for Costa Ricans, medicine is strongly attached to the home. Nearly one in three homes featured some kind of medicinal garden, known locally as a “finca”. On top of this, each family in the community had knowledge of the plants and how they could be used. It was apparent that this wisdom has been passed down from generation to generation and, most interestingly, was often the first line of defense against disease or other ailments. Because of this lifestyle, my experience with medicine in Costa Rica was far more intimate than any experience I have had in the U.S.

During my internship I spent my time in two different medicinal gardens. I had to first familiarize myself with the plants by sight and smell, something that many of the children there had already mastered. Then, I had to learn how to plant and cultivate the plants in a natural way. One of the most interesting things that I learned was how to coordinate our gardening with the cycle of the moon because plants respond in different ways to different phases. For me, this only further demonstrated the level of intimacy and care that Costa Ricans have for their plants. They even had their own natural remedies created from medicinal plants to protect against leaf-cutter ants or other insects that threatened the plants. My favorite part of the entire internship was actually preparing the plants for use. We made several alcohol extracts, oil infusions, and even an Aloe Vera drink that was used to detoxify the body. This hands-on experience is something I do not believe I would have gotten in a U.S. pharmaceutical lab. Additionally, I was able to see the ingredients come straight from the garden and into the products, not through the form of chemicals found in bottles on a shelf. Because the gardens were just a part of everyday life, the “doctors” were simply the parents. This was a valuable lesson for me. Professional doctors are not the only ones who know how to maintain overall wellness.

My entire experience raised many questions about the way I view medicine. As a pre-med student I found that there are more options than going to medical school, getting my M.D. and then prescribing loads of pills to my patients. I realized that there are many forms of medicine that differ completely with how I traditionally viewed medicine. Chinese medicine, homeopathic medicine, holistic medicine, and other forms of alternative medicine treat people naturally without a long list of side-effects. Pills cost hundreds of dollars more and aren’t made to prevent disease from happening, but rather only to relieve the symptoms caused by them. Medicinal plants are an alternative that have been proven to work effectively for thousands of different diseases and do not cost outrageous sums of money. In Costa Rica, these plants are widely available and the people have a well-established relationship with them. Although I was not able to bring the plants back with me, I brought back a vision of what medicine in the U.S. could look like if we are able to unify people and medicine.

Note: Eukaryon is published by students at Lake Forest College, who are solely responsible for its content. The views expressed in Eukaryon do not necessarily reflect those of the College. Articles published within Eukaryon should not be cited in bibliographies. Material contained herein should be treated as personal communication and should be cited as such only with the consent of the author.