Professor Matos encourages "living pharmacies" in Brazil to give local people access to medicinal plants

ROYAL BOTANIC GARDENS

countries. In the past the patenting laws have allowed drug companies to develop synthetic drugs based on plants from the developing world and sell them back to the country of origin at huge profits. The result is reduced access to the drug for local people. Dr Raymond Harley, one of Kew's head botanists, talks of "the nasty business of patents." A species of philanthus that causes relaxation of the ureters was used by local people for treating renal colic. "A company in the United States patented some extracts for use in another disorder and the locals couldn't then use it for treating kidney stones."

Kew's aim is to encourage the use of simple plant based medicines in developing countries. Projeto Nordeste is a collaborative project run by Kew and scientists in the north east of Brazil. One of its initiatives is to document the use of plants in traditional medicine and provide local people with the basic ingredients. Professor Francisco Matos, head of the natural products laboratory at the Federal University of Ceara in Fortaleza, has pioneered the setting up of "living pharmacies," small gardens that stock

commonly used medicinal plants and are run by local people experienced in their use. The idea is to enable people to provide for their own medical needs at affordable rates.

Projeto Nordeste also involves talking to local people and finding out what plants they use. The results of this ethnobotanical research—a combination of anthropology and pharmacology—is fed into a growing database housed in Recife.

Trying to assess what the value of the world's plants will be in the future is an impossible task. The problem, says Linda Fellows, is that we cannot predict in advance which plants are going to be useful. "Plants may contain chemicals that affect diseases as yet unrecognised."

- 1 Fellows LE. Pharmaceuticals from traditional medicinal plants and others: future prospects. In: Coombes JD, ed. *New drugs from natural sources*. London: IBC Technical Services, 1922.
- 2 Flint M. *Biological resources and developing countries*. London: Overseas Development Agency, 1991.
- 3 Scalise JA, Harchelroad F, Dean BS, Krenzelok EP. Berry identification by emergency health care providers. *Veterinary and Human Toxicology* 1988;30:426-8.

Confessions of a Benedictine drinker

Selwyn Taylor

"I here present you, courteous reader, with the record of a remarkable period of my life, and I trust that it will prove not merely an interesting record, but in a considerable degree useful and instructive. That must be my apology for breaking through the delicate and honourable reserve which, for the most part, restrains us from the public exposure of our own errors and infirmities."

Thus wrote that distinguished Mancunian, Thomas de Quincey, in the elegant opening lines of *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, in which he recounts why he became an addict while an undergraduate at Oxford, where he matriculated in 1803. He was 18.

"I first came to be a regular opium-eater," he continues, "not for the purpose of creating pleasure, but of mitigating pain in the severest degree." Though I confess to an inordinate and at times compelling pleasure in drinking wine, my reasons for starting to drink it were similar. Like de Quincey, I was a sufferer from the intense cold of sea water bathing. Which of you can tell me where the misery of cold ends and pain begins? Moreover, the choice of relief was mine only by proxy, it was my teetotal father who took the initial steps on my behalf.

In 1923, when I was 9, we took our summer holiday in August on the north coast of Brittany. Now the problem was that I simply could not learn to swim, although both my parents and my elder brother were proficient. So when I went into those cold, cold waves which roll in from the Atlantic I found myself so cold that my skin became purplish blue and covered in goose pimples. I still recall being exhorted to run up and down the beach in the sun to try to warm up and restore my circulation.

My father, being a schoolmaster, thought deeply about my disappointing performance and concluded that a vicious circle had developed between my sensitivity to cold and my inability to swim, and so he sought a remedy. He was rather proud of his French and could often be heard quietly talking to himself and practising new phrases as he walked up and down the beach. Eventually these prefabricated speeches were tried out on some unsuspecting native. The person he most enjoyed buttonholing was the proprietor of our hotel.

One evening my father bearded Monsieur and explained my problem in his best French. At that time of day Monsieur would sit behind the bar. He reached for two liqueur glasses and a bottle of Benedictine, and bidding my father join him he explained that this was a medicinal product which had excellent postprandial "digestif" properties. In addition, it imparted a wonderful warmth to the body which started internally and then moved out to the extremities in a remarkable way. This would help not only the youngest member, he declared, but all the family to enjoy their daily swim if taken immediately on leaving the water.

My father was impressed. Next morning we bought

"The magic lies in the skilful blend of aromatic herbs . . . which soothe the stomach."

a bottle of Benedictine, four tiny glasses, and a corkscrew. Our new equipment joined the tea basket in the beach hut.

In due course I was allowed to open my very first bottle of Benedictine. Initially it had to be divested of its clinging wrap of tissue paper, a most distinctive off white affair, which ended in a sort of Chinese pigtail wound in concentric circles as a top knot. Then the bottle was exposed in all its glory, that handsome distinctive shape—impossible to knock over, easy to grasp, immensely satisfying to look at. A real lead capsule had then to be excised, and then a further thin strip of lead, which plunged down from the collar to a little cleavage in the bosom of the deep green glass, where a magnificent red seal was housed. This displayed a shield with three mitres, which was overtopped by a larger mitre beside a crozier. Below was the splendid circular label with the monogram DOM. It was many years before I could interpret these cryptic initials. I doubt if my father knew their meaning either. They stand for deo optimo maximo—"In God most good, most great." A happy choice.

When I emerged from the freezing Atlantic water

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Impossible to knock over, easy to grasp, immensely satisfying to look at—deo optimo maximo

the golden elixir was poured out and I had my first sip. It took my breath away, but what a glorious sensation and what a wonderfully tantalising mixture of scents and tastes followed. Indeed by the time I had downed the whole glass and the alcohol had begun to exert its effects I was quite ready to enter the sea again.

About this time we met another English family on the beach. The idea that I could not swim became a personal challenge to the Danish nanny. She immediately took my instruction in hand and long before the end of the holiday I was safely propelling myself through the water.

Benedictine remains a great favourite all these years later. It is the digestif par excellence and can be relied on to round off almost any meal. Of course it is rich in alcohol—43°—and contains a generous modicum of sugar, but the magic lies in the skilful blend of aromatic herbs, some of them undoubtedly carminative, which soothe the stomach. It is said that the original concoction was made by a monk, Dom Bernardo Vincelli, in 1510 in the abbey at Fécamp on the coast of Normandy. Certainly the liqueur soon became famous and its production a major industry, but the abbey was destroyed in the French revolution in 1793. Luckily the recipe was saved and in the nineteenth century Monsieur Le Grand, a wine merchant, decided to recreate the liqueur. The recipe is still a well kept secret and manufacture today is on a huge scale.

Once when we were sailing along the Normandy

coast we visited the home of Benedictine at Fécamp. It was not at all what we had expected. Standing on the site of the old abbey is a late nineteenth century building with extraordinary architectural embellishment, in a style in harmony with St Pancras Station in London. We went inside accompanied by a spoken disembodied commentary. Behind the museum was the extraction room for the many herbs and beyond that the blending establishment. There is a bust of Le Grand in the entrance hall and a wooden statue of Bernardo Vincelli in the foyer.

Benedictine is the most widely available liqueur in the world today, and in the 70 or so years that I have been drinking it it has never palled. What can be the secret of its success? It lies in the herbs and essential oils, the latter no doubt from citrus fruit peel, which are added to the brandy and sugar which form the basis of the drink.

Next time you return home having dined unwisely, regretting the consequences and longing for the discomfort to pass, try our family remedy. Like all the best medicines it will certainly do no harm. Take a heat proof glass tumbler and pour into it an admiral's tot of Benedictine. Then add somewhat more than an equal volume of hot water. Stir and sip; do not hurry, and the discomfort will soon pass, or at the very least, become much more bearable. Perhaps Monsieur was indeed correct when he claimed all those years ago to my father that the drink had medicinal properties.

Word perfect

Here are the answers and explanations for the quiz on p 1580.

(1) Emunction: picking or wiping the nose. From Latin *emungere*, to wipe the nose. "Medicines applied to the eyes through these holes past into the nose, and so have been cast out either by emunction or by the mouth" (H Crooke, *Body of Man* 1615:538).

(2) Mitella: a sling for the arm. From Latin, a head band. "The mitella is a . . . scarf to carry the Arme in, that is hurt or wounded" (R Holme, *The Academy of Armoury* 1688:iii. 434/2).

(3) Incubus: nightmare. From Latin. "Such as are troubled with incubus, or witch ridden, as we call it, if they lie on their backs" (R Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* 1621:I.ii.111); "Night riding incubi troubling their fantasy" (C Lamb, *Hypochondria* 1834:30).

(4) Gravedo: a cold, coryza. From Latin, heaviness in the limbs or head. "Their affections of the chest and head, the cough, gravedo, sneezing, vertigo and catarrh" (*The Medical and Physical Journal* 1803:X. 140).

(5) Acnestis: the part of the back between the shoulders and the loins which an animal cannot reach. From Greek *aknestis*, the spine. (R Dunglison, *Medical Lexicon: a Dictionary of Medical Science* (7th ed 1848); "That spot known to crossword solvers as the acnestis" (*Observer* 3 April 1927)).

(6) Whirlbone: the patella. "When the bodie of Aiax was found, the whirlbone of his knee was adjudged so broad as a pretie dish" (W Harrison, *The Description of England* 1587:I.v.11); "The patella, or whirlbone of the knee . . . is oft-times contused" (T Johnson,

trans, *The Workes of that Famous Chirurgion Parey* 1634:XV.xii,340).

(7) Pandiculation: yawning. From Latin *pandiculare*, to stretch oneself. "By mere dint of pandiculation, vulgarly called yawning" (T De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* 1856:217).

(8) Cilliosis: spasmodic trembling of the eyelid. From Latin *cillere*, to move or agitate. (*Hooper Medical Dictionary* 1812; *Sydenham Society Lexicon of Medical and Allied Sciences* 1881).

(9) Bechic: cough medicine. From Greek *bēx*, cough. "The cough's cured by . . . bechicks" (R Lovell, *A Compleat History of Animals and Minerals* 1661:359); "The Lungs smoothed and moistened with Bechicks" (*Benet's Mercurius Compitalitius* 1684 translation: xvii. 595).

(10) Brontophobia: fear of thunder. From Greek *brontē*, thunder, and *phobos*, fear. "He was affected with brontophobia in his later years" (W G Holmes, *Justinian and Theodora* 1905:1.iii.298n).

(11) Bumble foot: disease of feet in domestic fowl. "Occasionally the sole of the foot . . . becomes the seat of a thron-like growth. . . Such a condition is commonly termed bumble foot" (J W Hill, *Diseases of Poultry* 1886:87); "Bumble-foot comes from the ball of the foot" (*Poultry* 1854:Chron 1. 205).

(12) Dewlap: pendulous loose skin on the throat and neck, especially of animals but also in humans. Origin of "dew" uncertain; "lap" from Old English, *Laeppe*, pendulous piece. "When she drinks, against her lips I bob. And on her wither'd dewlop poure the Ale" (W Shakespeare, *Midsummer Night's Dream* 1590:II.i.50); "Dewlaps hang down from the chaps" (W Walker, *Idiomatalogia Anglo-Latinia* 1690:220).