Was Hippocrates a conman?

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When I was a teenager in the 1960s, The Beatles were my idols. Using their immortal words to begin my discourse on the debate between natural and conventional medicine, *"Do you want to know a secret?"* That secret is had I been around 320 years earlier, my admiration might have been directed towards a remarkable physician of the day, Nicolas Culpeper. Of course, circa 1640 a group of trendy roving minstrels might have caught my teenage eye but try as I might, I can't conceive the possibility that such passion would have been aroused by a physician of the 1960s.

Would idolisation of Culpepper have been justified? Or, as with The Beatles, could it have been due to a wave of mass hysteria on account of Culpepper's reputation as a physician? Was his reputation justified? Did Culpepper actually heal anyone? The answer is probably no, if we're to believe those today who doubt that we, as Naturopaths, are able to heal. After all, Culpepper was using similar therapeutic strategies, so if they don't work today, how could they have worked in the 17th century?

Are these doubters claiming that prior to the relatively recent development of laboratory-made drugs, in the whole history of mankind no-one was ever healed of any disease? Did the likes of the Greek, Chinese, Ayurvedic and Persian physicians get it wrong for thousands of years? And what about Hippocrates – he who is revered by the medical profession! Were all the 'cures' they achieved nothing more than the result of placebo. If the doubters say traditional/natural medicine doesn't work now, it can't possibly have worked throughout the history of mankind, so Hippocrates must have been a conman.

Yet we know that aspirin and digitalis originated from plants. The molecules that led to Taxane drugs for cancer were isolated from yew trees *(genus taxus)*. If those plants didn't possess proven healing benefits why did pharmaceutical companies invest so much time and money producing drugs from them? Did they have faith in the ability of these drugs, and therefore the herbs themselves to cure, or was the aim to produce a placebo and con the masses?

Mankind learned about therapeutic properties from observation of animals who, when unwell, instinctively sought out specific plants. I learned from Pollyanna, a friend's pony who, to no avail, had spent 9 months on huge doses of steroids and codeine. When I held out packets of herbs, she picked the ones she needed. Her choices changed so I became accustomed to asking her which ones she wanted each day. When I walked her alongside a hedgerow, she stopped to eat a particular plant. The next two days she stopped at the same plant but the following day she walked past and chose another plant. How many humans have the instinct to know what they need, and when they've had enough of a particular remedy? I also learned from Willow, one of my pet Shetland sheep. At the age of about 16 I found her in an area where none of the sheep usually grazed. The fact she was there on her own told me she was unwell; how strong an instinct she had to know that here she'd find a particular plant she needed. Whether it's an herbal remedy or homeopathy, animals really don't understand a placebo effect.

We're constantly reminded that when it comes to healing, pharmacology reigns supreme. But the development of pharmacology has also been partly through observation, such as the simple association between scurvy and a then unknown property of lemons and limes that led to the acceptance of vitamin C by mainstream medicine.

And hasn't the skill of healing developed by trial and error. Plant remedies can't possibly have worked every time - rather like the pharmaceutical drugs of today! Time is on the side of traditional medicine, the 'experimental' work has been done over the millennia, whereas with pharmaceutical drugs, the experiment is ongoing. Pharmaceutical companies may carry

out extensive tests on individual drugs but they don't always produce safe drugs, and do they assess the combined safety of several different drugs taken together?

Those who doubt natural medicine should look back at the roots of pharmacology to see when and how it all began. If they doubt the likes of Garlic, Frankincense and Myrrh saved countless lives thousands of years ago, then they must also question historical evidence itself. Garlic, Frankincense and Myrrh were prized for their wound healing properties – or maybe the dreadful wounds experienced by so many simply got better by themselves! If, on the other hand, these doubters acknowledge the historical records and accept that such herbs were effective in bygone days, then surely the laws of nature must hold as true in the 21st century as they have been for thousands of years. In many cases, the 'evidence' desired by the doubters IS out there, as discovered by Edzard Ernst in regard to Frankincense!

To finish as I began with the words of The Beatles, these are my thoughts, sent "*With love from me to you".*

References:

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Frankincense: systematic review
23 November 2008 Edzard Ernst http://www.bmj.com/content/337/bmj.a2813.full
Systemic review:
The included trials related to asthma, rheumatoid arthritis, Crohn's disease, osteoarthritis, and collagenous colitis. Results of all trials indicated that B serrata extracts were clinically effective.
• Frankincense has a long history of use • Some of its ingredients have anti-inflammatory activity. It shows encouraging results for conditions caused or maintained by inflammation