

by *Michelle Greiver, MD*

THE CURE IS IN THE BAG

Is there a correlation between the number of unconventional remedies ingested and overall health status?

Anyone who walks into a drugstore can readily attest that nontraditional remedies are increasing in popularity at lightning speed. Indeed, the Canadian market for nonconventional products such as herbal remedies is now worth more than \$200 million annually. However, no study has attempted to correlate the number of remedies taken with overall health status.

Our patients are taking these products for a variety of indications, and my observational study was designed to explore the number of remedies taken and then correlate that finding with my patients' state of health. I discovered that sicker patients tended to take fewer remedies. This may indicate that an overflowing medicine cabinet is associated with better health, if poorer wealth.

I asked consecutive patients presenting for their annual physical checkup to bring me all of the over-the-counter medications they currently consume. These items were duly noted.

The patient who set the record — a middle-aged woman — arrived carrying 13 different types of pills that she takes for various ailments. After taking a moment to call my broker to tell her to buy Herbs 'R Us stock, I went through this bounty of bottles and discovered garlic, lecithin, melatonin, vitamins C, E and B complex, St. John's wort, a very smelly pill that was probably valerian, echinacea, royal jelly, ginkgo, evening primrose oil and calcium/magnesium tablets. From a medical standpoint, her main characteristic was a complete lack of serious medical problems.

The patient explained that she needed these medications to maintain cardiac health, battle occasional bouts of insomnia and nerves, overcome her propensity for upper respiratory infections and give her immune system a general tune-up.

She had sought advice carefully: her drug regimen had been prescribed by her reflexologist, iridologist, neighbour and chiropractor. Unfortunately, notes from these



consultants were unavailable for review during our office visit.

I did note that the patient felt well. Her arrival in the office was preceded by what sounded like a mariachi band. The noise turned out to have been the rattling of pill bottles in her purse.

She was able to manage her complex regimen without problems, but there were some unfortunate side effects: a notable lack of shelf space in her bathroom cabinet and a condition I was heretofore unfamiliar with, anorexia of the wallet.

During my study I observed that as the number of medical conditions increased, the number of unconventional remedies taken decreased. This was strongly correlated with an increase in the number of prescription drugs taken.

I concluded that there may be a homeostatic mechanism at play, which ensures that the number of pills ingested remains constant. The average number of nontraditional remedies taken by my patients was 3, with vitamin preparations and herbal medications leading the parade.

It could be speculated that a pill-of-the-month club might influence the type of pills ingested, as there appeared to be very little correlation between a patient's clinical status and the type of pill chosen. Recent reports that some herbal remedies were contaminated with digitoxin could have been behind the investigator's palpitations and feelings of nausea as she discussed with patients some of the more interesting concoctions presented.

From my small study, I concluded that there is some evidence of a correlation between overall health and number of unconventional remedies taken. Whether the ill take fewer pills because they are a frill is a fact that remains to be investigated.

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