Turning folklore into an ethnomedicinal catalogue


Medicinal plants in South Africa contribute to both the health and livelihood of many indigenous populations. The study of ethnomedecology in the country is important not only as a means to preserve indigenous plant knowledge, but also to serve the natural products economic sector. The significance of materia medica in South Africa society remains an inherent part of many cultures, with an estimated 70% of the population using plants for medicinal purposes.

It is a mammoth undertaking to attempt to summarise medically used plants in South Africa, as reports indicate that over 4 000 species are ethnomedically significant, with some 3 000 plants being medicinally useful. The culture of plant use is not driven only by the incredible biodiversity which exists in southern Africa where three of the world’s ‘biodiversity hotspots’ (the Cape Floristic Region, the Succulent Karoo, and the Albany-Maputaland corridor), are found, but also by the coexistence of diverse ethnic groups, their associated beliefs and practices. To attempt to deal with this colossal undertaking, the authors have included only key species which are used by different South African cultural groups. The introductory sections cover the importance of medicinal plants and associated aspects of cultural healing in the South African context. Methods relating to collection; parts of the plant used; dosage and storage, administration of plants and extracts and the active ingredients are similar to the first edition of this book, which appeared in 1997.

The authors have added 18 new plant monographs so that 150 species are now covered in detail. Some of these plants deserve special mention, such as Pelargonium sidoides. Apart from extensive chemical analysis of its properties, current studies focus on the socioeconomics and poverty alleviation strategies associated with trade of this species; the development of cultivation regimes to establish it as a crop; the ecological and conservation-driven assessment of wild populations; and clinical trials. Commercial extracts of this plant have now been prepared, resulting in it being listed in the South African national list of medicinal plants. Incorporation of this information is one of the features which make this edition superior to its predecessor. The authors have thus drawn on new knowledge which has been acquired through scientific efforts directed at validating traditional uses through providing pharmacological evidence for the efficacy of plants as medicines. In general, this has led to a better understanding of medically significant plants in South Africa, although our current understanding is by no means complete. The book offers a comprehensive insight into a wide flora which is intimately linked with physical wellbeing and psycho-spiritual rituals in this country. This will surely be a platform for new work, both on the species already covered and on those that have been excluded from the collection. Such revisions are essential to maintain and stimulate research activities. Linked to this, the documentation of plant use in South Africa is crucial, as indigenous knowledge on medical plants is historically maintained orally from one generation to another. This knowledge is at risk of being lost as a result of continued urbanisation and acculturation, which began over 300 years ago with the arrival of European settlers. Many acknowledge that there is still a paucity of detailed documentation of ethnomedical knowledge and the extent to which modernisation, particularly increased migration into urban centres by rural dwellers, is leading to its erosion. Other factors influencing the way in which medicinal plants are used, are linked to lifestyle diseases such as diabetes, hypertension and HIV/AIDS (to a name a few) which have become more prevalent in contemporary South Africa.

The first edition was a well-loved and a salient reference, but, a revised edition was overdue after more than ten years since its publication. The second edition will continue to fulfil this function for a wide range of users of medicinal plants, from patients and sängomas to scientific researchers. It can be used as a field guide, and is written in a style that is accessible to a wide audience that may not be scientifically inclined.

N.P. Makunga

Department of Botany and Zoology, Private Bag X1, Stellenbosch University, Matieland, 7801 South Africa.

E-mail: makunga@sun.ac.za