

Oral presentation

From “Stevens’ Cure” to a modern multi-million Euro herbal product. The story of Umckaloabo.

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Introduction. In 1897 Charles Stevens returned from South Africa with a secret remedy. In the following 40 years he turned “Umckaloabo” for the treatment of consumption (tuberculosis) into a success, both as an efficacious remedy and a business. After WW2 and the death of Stevens, a German manufacturer of homoeopathic remedies, purchased the “secret” and for the following 25 years Umckaloabo practically disappeared. It took until the early 70s for the remedy to be finally identified as a root preparation of *Pelargonium sidoides/reniforme*, and another 20 years for it to finally re-enter the market as a cough and cold remedy. In 2005, sales of Umckaloabo overtook those of the hitherto biggest-selling herbal in Germany, totalling 90 Mio Euro.

Objectives. To identify the milestones in the process of turning of Umckaloabo from a secret remedy into a successful, modern and efficacious herbal medicinal product.

Methods. Numerous libraries, public and private archives were consulted. All accessible evidence, historical as well as modern scientific, was identified, systematized and reviewed.

Results. Close to 200 documents, including historical and modern publications, case reports, court proceedings, advertising material and correspondence were identified, traced, obtained and analysed, key players and supply routes were followed up. Samples of the original remedy were discovered; these are currently in the process of being identified. The science behind and the marketing strategies for the modern herbal product were studied and evaluated.

Conclusion. The process of commercialization of this South African remedy in Europe has been strongly influenced by personal interest and random circumstances and therefore does not follow a predictable pattern. The same route of introduction would not be accessible in modern times.

Keywords: South African ethnomedicine, *Pelargonium* spp., commercialization

Selected References

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