

Poster

Beliefs on the use of plants as food and medicine among Vietnamese immigrants in the US and urban Vietnamese in Vietnam

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Introduction. Cultural concepts that categorize plants, especially food plants, within systems of health and medicine are shared among the Asian general population. The extent to which these conceptualizations exist and continue to be used within a health framework among urban Vietnamese populations has not been well established.

Objectives. To examine attitudes and practices of Eastern and Western systems of medicine, as well as general beliefs on the use of plants, specifically, herbal teas and food plants, among Vietnamese immigrants in Chicago and natives in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam; and to run bioassays on selected food plants in an attempt to seek scientific support.

Methods. Ethnographic data were obtained through participant observation, focus groups and structured interviews; with 104 and 173 community members in Chicago and in Ho Chi Minh City, respectively, interviewed. Food plants were dried and extracted with chloroform for initial screening in various chemotargets including inhibition assays such as cyclooxygenase-1 and 2 (COX-1 and COX-2), Luciferase ARE, Luciferase NFκB and Aromatase induction assays (i.e. Quinone reductase [QR]) and cytotoxicity assays.

Results. This research revealed that concurrent or serial use of Western and Eastern medicine is prevalent in both populations, although 66.1% of the total study population (N=277) believes simultaneous use of both medical systems is potentially harmful. Hot/cold properties of food plants and herbal teas played a role in their use as medicines, especially in balancing the side effects of Western medicines (considered “hot”). Of the 99 plant extracts screened, the total number of samples characterized as “active” against any of the various targets was established in the range of 55.6% (n = 55).

Conclusion. Preliminary screening provides support on the potentials of food plants as sources of both preventive and therapeutic medicine. Understanding the contexts of traditional therapeutic uses of plants as well as their combined pharmacologic activities, are critical for elucidating their potential impact in public health, e.g. their effectiveness or contraindications.

Keywords: Vietnam; medicinal plants; food plants

Selected References

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