

Complementarity in nurse-herbalism: Partnering with plants for the purpose of promoting health

Complementarity is a concept that has been defined by physicist Niels Bohr as a general principle that promotes “mutual understanding and respect among diverse cultures and allows for the unity of human knowledge.”^[1] In physics, complementarity is demonstrated as the inclusion of the existence of contrasting particle and wave theories of light. Bohr suggested that complementarity could be used by other disciplines outside of physics. Complementarity in nursing is demonstrated by the integration of diverse health beliefs, philosophies, and healing practices for promoting health as greater balance in body, mind, emotion, and spirit.

Herbalism is one area of integrative nursing that demonstrates complementarity. Nurse-herbalists are as able to draw insights from botanical scientific literature about key phytoconstituents’ actions on human physiology as they are to learn ancient plant remedy applications from community healers. For example, nurses in American nursing homes in the 1970s performed studies on the use of chlorophyll in the management of urine and fecal odors related to incontinence,^[2] thus operationalizing the biomedical science confirming the health benefits of chlorophyll.

Nurse-herbalism has for centuries been a key component of nature cure and the creation of a healing environment. The plant world in its many forms, such as leaves, flowers, roots, barks, fruits, seeds, and saps is used in the many remedies that nurses apply to a human being based on their energetic need. Nurses continue to apply ancient wisdom in their use of soups, poultices, teas, syrups, compresses, salves, liniments, tablets, alcohol extracts, and floral waters to cool patterns of heat, warm cold patterns, tonify Qi (energy), blood, yin and yang, drain dampness, and moisten dryness. In the hands of nurses around the world, herbal remedies, such as the Thai “herb ball” compress known as “Luk Pra Kob” to potato poultices in the American southwest, comfort patients’ symptoms, such as pain and fever. Nurses in Europe and America continue to offer footbaths to their patients to which they add brewed coffee for head congestion, chamomile for painful sinuses, or rosemary for improving memory.

There are also many nurses throughout history who have “cured” disease with herbal remedies. For example, Hildegard

von Bingen (1098–1179), a German nurse, cured many by applying the healing power of herbs, such as galangal (*Alpinia galanga*) for protection against heart attacks and angina.^[3]

In the 19th century, the American Shaker nurses officiated over the health-care system of their communities. The nurses made their own remedies for their infirmity patients from the plants growing in their gardens or from those gathered in local fields and forests. Their infirmity work was the testing ground for the remedies that they wildcrafted, grew and produced to be sold around the world. “The Shaker nurses administered botanical treatments known as emetics, cathartics, injections (enemas), steams, and sweats for mild-to-moderate illnesses, such as stomach pain and influenza.”^[4] As herbalism is such a common component of nursing care throughout the centuries, it is not surprising that historical examples are often undocumented.

In recent decades, at least until the 1950s,^[5,6] American nursing textbooks included herbal materia medica. For example, the topical application of herbal plasters of *counterirritant* herbs, such as cayenne (*Capsicum frutescens*) and mustard (*Brassica spp.*), was described in the textbooks as being used to warm and stimulate circulation in a particular part of the body.^[6] Nurses, around the globe, such as those from Switzerland, Germany, and New Zealand who follow an anthroposophical philosophy of care, continue to use herbs in their caregiving practices. Leaders in this tradition have documented the findings of numerous research studies on the use of lemon compress in fever reduction^[7] and the use of ginger compress in decreasing pain in those with osteoarthritis.^[8] Canadian nurse, Rene Caisse received an herbal tea formula from an Ojibwe man. She provided the tea she named *Essiac* to thousands from her clinic in Ontario.^[9] Nurses and nurse midwives continue to provide herbal relief for breast engorgement with the application of cool cabbage leaves, St. John’s Wort oil for prevention of perineal tears, and post-partum perineal compresses soaked with witch hazel distillate.^[10,11]

The *Journal of Integrative Nursing* has published a number of papers on nurse-herbalism. My coeditor and her colleagues published a paper that refers to applications

in nurse-herbalism as “technology” demonstrating again the complementarity that lies within the specialty of integrative nursing. Those traditional Chinese medicine “nursing technologies” included: moxibustion, acupoint patching, Chinese herbal soaking, Chinese herbal wet and hot compress, TCM iontophoresis, TCM fumigation, Chinese herbal cold compress, Chinese herbal hot ironing, massage, and acupoint injection.^[12]

Some disciplines denote these practices of herbalism as a “complementary” or “alternative” therapy or, in some countries, as the practice of medicine; however, the study and application of medicinal plants in nursing practice are a nursing tradition. Rather than being complementary to medicine or nursing practice, there are centuries of enduring evidence that herbalism, like therapeutic communication, touch, and creating healing environments, *is* the practice of nursing and nurse-midwifery.^[13] Nurse-herbalism demonstrates the foundations of complementarity in integrative nursing science, art, and practice as the incorporation of traditional, biomedical, complementary, and self-care paradigms in professional care and comfort with plants as partners.

This editorial acknowledges just a few examples of the diverse expressions of nurse-herbalism around the globe. We now call for more clinical and research articles on nurse-herbalism that clearly exemplify the complementarity of this centuries-old healing tradition now referred to as integrative nursing, in which we partner with patients and plants for the purpose of promoting health as balance in body and peace of mind.

Martha Mathews LIBSTER

Golden Apple Healing Arts, LLC, Wauwatosa, WI, USA

Address for correspondence: Prof. Martha Mathews LIBSTER, Golden Apple Healing Arts, LLC, 6650 W. State Street, Suite D95, Wauwatosa, WI 53213, USA.
E-mail: martha@drmarthalibster.com

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