

## Book reviews

**Dietary Supplements of Plant Origin: A Nutrition and Health Approach**

Edited by Massimo Maffei. Taylor & Francis, London, 2003. ISBN 0-415-30835-6. 248 pp. £105.00

In recent years there has been an increased interest in plant-derived supplements that aim to improve our health. This interest has resulted in a vast amount of literature on the activity of these supplements also known as functional foods or nutraceuticals. However, the scientific quality of much of the information being published is poor and scattered among a wide range of different journals and web sites. This book aims to bring some of this information together and to provide the reader with an overview of issues that face the development of the market for plant-derived supplements.

The book is divided into nine Chapters and each varies greatly in length and some in quality. The first Chapter by Bernadette Marriott is short and provides an overview of the terms used in the supplements industry and the growing size of this billion \$ market. The author also provides some very useful web sites that can be used to find scientific information about the health and nutritional information about supplements. The final chapter by Gail Mahady builds on this information by providing data about the different agencies writing monographs and the different databases and journals that collate and publish information about the plant-derived products. The chapter by Valerio Bombardelli provides an insight into the differences in the regulations for herbal products adopted by countries in Europe. For example, in the Netherlands there is no law regulating herbal products, whereas in Germany the health authorities accept that many herbal products have therapeutic properties and are usually marketed as medicines but there is a lack of clarity between a medicine and the use of a supplement to treat a nutritional deficiency. In 2003 the European Parliament plans to have a directive to bring harmony to the diversity of regulations in Europe. Franco Vincieri and Antonella Riva describe the aims and role of monographs of the European Scientific Co-operative on Phytotherapy (ESCOP). ESCOP has provided information from the scientific literature about many herbs being used in Europe and also information about how different European countries deal with specific species.

Dr. Can Baser deals with the active compounds in some industrially grown species of plants. There is some overlap with this chapter and the very informative and well constructed chapter by Giovanni Appendino and Orazio Tagliatella-Scafati. The later authors describe the recent research on the beneficial activity of compounds in some of our common herbs. It is a shame that the editor had not decreased the amount of overlap that occurs in chapters that present the same information about the biologically active compounds.

Marco Mucciarelli describes the tools and techniques used in plant biotechnology that are or could be used to increase the concentration of active compounds in industrially grown plants. The chapter by the editor Massimo Maffei justifies a book in its own right. The remit of this chapter is wide from the biochemical pathways evolved by plants to produce the bio-active compounds to ethical questions associated with the use of genetically modified crops. It is a shame that the editor did not divide this chapter into smaller units.

Interactions between plant-derived compounds with other medicines is covered in an informative chapter by Jerry Cott. The author has gathered information about how St John's wort interacts with a range of medicines including cyclosporin, digoxin, oral contraceptives and antidepressants.

The book ends with an interesting and very useful appendix on families of plants that contain species that are reported to have cancer-protective or anti-cancer activity.

This book is useful in collating data about plant-derived supplements and the beneficial role the so called secondary metabolites in these supplements could have on our health. It is clear that more scientific information needs to be gathered to support many of the claims. To date there is very little information about the amount that people would have to consume to benefit from these supplements. However, the book could provide a source of information for those researching supplements, especially those wanting to have an introduction to the subject.

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