

Herbal medicine through an evolutionary lens

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Pseudowintera colorata, a plant species used medicinally in New Zealand. *Pseudowintera* species are used traditionally by Māori people to treat skin conditions, respiratory problems, and to help heal wounds. Credit: Steven Wagstaff

A phylogenetic study has shown that related plants are used traditionally in three disparate regions to treat similar medical conditions.

There is often scepticism surrounding traditional herbal treatments, partly due to scarcity in large-scale evidence of efficacy of traditional medicine. A team of researchers from Kew, the University of Reading,

Imperial College and RBG Edinburgh, in collaboration with colleagues from Nepal and New Zealand, have conducted a phylogenetic study that provides support for herbal remedies.

The researchers constructed a genus-level family tree representing 20,000 plant species found in three disparate regions (Nepal, New Zealand, and the Cape of South Africa), in order to compare medicinal plants used in these geographic areas. They found that plants traditionally used to treat similar health conditions came from the same plant clusters across the three floras. These shared phylogenetic patterns in [traditional herbal medicine](#) were interpreted as independent discovery of efficacy in these [plant groups](#). This was supported by the finding that many plants used to produce drugs come from these clusters highlighted by traditional knowledge, suggesting that plant [bioactivity](#) underlies [traditional medicine](#) worldwide.

More information: Haris Saslis-Lagoudakis, C., et al. (2012). Phylogenies reveal predictive power of traditional medicine in bioprospecting. *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci.* 109: 15835-1584.

Provided by Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

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