

Romania keeps ancient tradition of bee medicine alive

April 10 2014, by Isabelle Wesselingh



A Romanian bee keeper is seen checking hives near Bucharest, on April 4, 2014

Bee venom to combat multiple sclerosis, pollen for indigestion, honey to heal wounds—the humble bee has been a key source of alternative medicines since ancient times, and Romania is working to keep the tradition of "apitherapy" alive.

The tradition goes back to ancient Greece when Hippocrates applied

honey to treat wounds, and the Romans saw pollen as "life-giving".

In the past of India, China and Egypt, a resinous substance collected by bees from the buds of certain trees, known as "propolis", was popular as an antiseptic.

"The hive is the oldest and healthiest natural pharmacy," said Cristina Mateescu, director general of the Institute for Apicultural Research and Development in Bucharest.

Today in the wilderness of Romania's Carpathian mountains, honey bee products are still a familiar part of traditional medicine.

"In my village, my great-grandmother was a healer and used products from beehives. She inspired me," Dr Mariana Stan told AFP.

Having spent years as a conventional doctor, Stan now practises in Bucharest as a "apitherapist"—using bee products "which give slower but longer lasting and more profound results".

In a country still infused with folk culture, several families continue to use propolis against sore throats, as well as honey and pollen to boost the immune system.

Apitherapy pioneer

Every town in Romania has its "plafar"—natural pharmacies selling products made from plants, honey, beeswax and propolis.

"Romania is a pioneer of apitherapy, which it recognised very early as a component of scientific medicine," said US professor Theodor Charbuliez, head of the Apimondia Commission of Apitherapy, a group that brings together thousands of practitioners from around the world.



An assistant checks the texture of bee venom based cream at the factory of the Research and Development Institute of Beekeeping, in Bucharest, on March 18, 2014

Modules on apitherapy have started to work their way into more conventional medical classes and extracts from propolis developed by the Apicultural institute into recognised medicines.

Founded in 1974, the institute employs 105 people who look after local bee colonies and sell around 30 approved products.

A new range even seeks to treat cats and dogs with bee-related products.

Bucharest also boasts an Apitherapy medical centre, the world's first, which opened in 1984.

Scepticism remains among the regular medical community in the absence of scientific studies about the effects of [bee venom](#), but many users are full of praise and welcome the cheap costs and environmentally friendly approach.

Doina Postolachi comes twice a week to the medical centre to receive injections of bee venom, or "apitoxin".



Various kinds of honey, seen at a honey and beekeeping products fair in Bucharest, April 4, 2014

The 34-year-old poet says the injections have allowed her to "rediscover hope" in her fight against [multiple sclerosis](#).

"For a year, I could no longer walk or get into my bath. My feet were stuck to the ground. But today, the venom treatment has given me back

strength in my legs. I walk, I can take baths," she said.

She said she has never wanted any regular pharmaceutical treatments "which come with numerous side effects".

Bees do wonders

There has been mounting interest across the world in apitherapy.

In 2013, Washington University in the US city of St Louis published a study on the efficacy of milittine, a toxin contained in bee venom, in countering the AIDS virus.



Doina Postolachi, 34, receives bee venom treatment at a medical center in Bucharest, on March 28, 2014

In France, thousands of patients have benefited from bandages treated with honey at the abdominal surgery department of Limoges hospital.

Bee products are also infiltrating the cosmetics industry, used in skin-toning and anti-wrinkle creams.

Part of the appeal rests with the natural and organic image of bee products.

"In Romania, we have the chance to maintain an unspoiled nature," said Cornelia Dostetan, a member of the National Apitherapy Society.

Under Communism, poverty meant that pesticides were rarely used and the country has never shifted to large-scale monoculture forms of agriculture. The result is that Romania retains a great diversity of flora, said Dostetan.

Certified organic, the Romanian brand Apiland, a specialist in raw pollen, has launched its products in France and Italy.

According to the last agricultural census in 2010, Romania counted 42,000 beekeepers and more than 1.3 million colonies of bees.

Postolachi says she looks on the bees with "immense gratitude".

"These miniscule beings do wonders."

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