

# PHYTOTHERAPY

Gerben Hoogsteen studied Medicine at the Erasmus University Rotterdam and graduated in 1987. Since 1989, he has been a member of the Dutch Association for Phytotherapy and in 2018 he obtained his diploma in Phytotherapy for Doctors at the University of Bochum, Germany.

Since 2016, he has been a phytotherapeutic doctor at UNIIK, where he treats patients with chronic conditions using herbal medicines.



# PHYTOTHERAPY

## Gerben Hoogsteen

### Herbal medicines, a promise for future healthcare

#### Health care professionals and herbal medicines

In 2019, in the magazine *Phytotherapy Research*, Bhamra et al. published their study about healthcare professionals' view on herbal medicines in the United Kingdom. The authors found variable knowledge of herbal medicines among them. Healthcare professionals were not satisfied with the training they received on herbal medicines. Because of that, many felt incompetent giving advice to patients about herbal medicines. According to the authors, the results of their research demonstrate that the issue of lack of education needs to be addressed. Better education and training of healthcare professionals will improve their knowledge and awareness of herbal medicines (1).

#### Consumers and herbal medicines/plant food supplements in the Netherlands and the UK

In 2018, S. Jeurissen et al. studied the use of plant food supplements in the Netherlands. They found the prevalence of plant food supplement users in the Dutch population was 10% for men, 17% for women, and 13% for children. Consumers used a wide variety of 600 different plant food supplements (2). R. Lazarou et al. did research among consumers in the United Kingdom and described in 2019 in their article about the popularity of herbal medicines in this country, particularly among the 36 to 55-year-old age group. Consumers mostly used herbal medicines for minor self-limiting conditions. The main reasons for herbal medicine use were the natural origin and fewer side effects. The authors recommended an increase in quality control and wider regulation (3).

#### Registration of herbal medicines and HMPC monographs

In accordance with the EU Directive 2004, the European Medicines Agency (EMA) established the Committee on Herbal Medicinal Products (HMPC). This Committee is responsible for compiling and assessing scientific data on herbal substances, preparations and combinations in order to support the harmonization of the European herbal market. The HMPC focuses on the main task of

establishing EU monographs covering the therapeutic uses and safe conditions of Well Established Use (WEU) and/or Traditional Use (TU) for herbal substances and preparations (4). The monographs support national authorities to refer to one unique set of information on a herbal substance of preparation when evaluating marketing applications. An EU herbal monograph contains the HMPC's scientific opinion on safety and efficacy data about a herbal substance and its preparations intended for medical use (5). Till now, the HMPC produced 164 herbal monographs on the EMA website which are open for the public and healthcare professionals (6).

In 2011, the Dutch magazine *Pharmaceutisch Weekblad* published an article of the Dutch Board of Evaluation of Medicine (CBG) about herbal medicine. The authors gave a summary of the situation of herbal medicine in Europe and the Netherlands which nowadays only changed a little. The EU Directive 2004 regulates a simplified TU registration for herbal medicines which can be used for self-care only. However, pharmaceutical quality must be guaranteed, safety must be demonstrated and efficacy should be plausible. Herbal medicines can also be registered as (WEU) herbal medicine if human clinical trials also show sufficient positive evidence of efficacy. In the Netherlands, both registered herbal medicines are on the market (7).

#### The importance of quality of herbal medicines

However, most herbal preparations on the Dutch market are not registered as herbal medicine. Most herbal manufacturers make use of the Dutch law called "Warenwet" to put herbal preparations as food supplements on the Dutch market. Important motives to do so are lower costs, quicker and easier introduction into the market, and no registration requirements. The dangers of this are shown in research of the Dutch Food and Drug Administration (NVWA) in 2019 concerning the herbal product *Hypericum perforatum* L. This investigation showed that 9 of the investigated 47 *Hypericum* products available on the Dutch market contained unacceptable concentrations of toxic pyrrolizidine-alkaloids. These substances belong to other plants which are harvested together with *Hypericum*. The Dutch Food and Drug

Administration also found that 6 of the 22 tested Hypericum products had no traces of hypericin (important quality marker of Hypericum) and that 9 of the tested 22 had less than 50% hypericin as prescribed (8). This emphasizes the importance of quality requirements of herbal medicines and plant food supplements.

### **Interactions by herbal medicines**

Another important issue is herbal interactions with other medications. This is not surprising, because herbal medicines contain pharmacologically active ingredients which can influence the absorption or elimination of other drugs. The Dutch CBG launched a campaign in July 2019 to inform healthcare professionals and consumers about herbal interactions (9). On their website, you can find a list of 10 herbal medicinal products and their interactions with other drugs (9). An important initiative that is still ongoing, because CBG is now working at expanding this list of herbal medicinal products and interactions.

### **How can herbal medicinal products be characterised?**

- 1 Herbal medicinal products are medicines that contain medicinal ingredients from plants or parts of plants (leaves, flowers, seeds, roots). This means atropine or digoxin as a single substance is not a part of this group.
- 2 The total extract is the active ingredient of the herbal medicine.
- 3 The extract contains many different substances with possible synergistic actions.
- 4 The effect is mild to moderate.
- 5 The effect arises gradually within days or weeks.
- 6 Side effects are rare (10).

### **What can healthcare professionals do with herbal medicinal products?**

First of all, be aware that herbal preparations are widely used by consumers. Secondly, consumers are not always aware of interactions with comedication. Therefore, ask them if they are using herbal medicines or plant food preparations. Most people will be grateful for your question, and this strengthens your professional relationship with them for the future. Thirdly, consumers can experience positive results when taking herbal medicines or plant food supplements. Show genuine interest in their experiences. A new world can open up for you. Because herbal medicines can do very well in relation to depression, problems with sleeping or circulation, airway infections, digestive complaints, cystic problems, irritations of the skin or joint or muscle problems. Generally, herbal products have fewer side effects and fit in the spirit of times looking at the EU Green Deal. They could also be a partial solution to the pollution with chemical medicines like diclofenac in our water supply. This means that we definitely need to build the bridge between herbal medicines and healthcare in our country. What we should do is reopen the present knowledge and experiences about herbal medicines in our country and the surrounding EU members. As chairman of the Dutch Association of Phytotherapy (NVF) I am sure our members are willing to share their knowledge about herbs with you as our next generation healthcare professionals (11). Therefore, teaching in herbal medicines should return in Pharmacy University education in the Netherlands, also in Groningen. The sooner, the better.



## Literature list

- 1 Bhamra S.K. et al. Health care professionals personal and professional views of herbal medicines in the United Kingdom. *Phytotherapy Research* 2019; 22:2360-2368
- 2 Jeurissen S. M.F et al. Consumption of plant food supplements in the Netherlands. *Food & Function* 2018; 9: 179-190
- 3 Lazarou et al. Herbal Medicine. Who cares? The changing views on medicinal plants and their roles in British lifestyle. *Phytotherapy Research* 2019; 33; 2409-2420
- 4 HMPC: <https://www.ema.europa.eu/en/committees/committee-herbal-medicinal-products-hmpc>
- 5 EU Herbal Monographs <https://www.ema.europa.eu/en/human-regulatory/herbal-products/european-union-monographs-list-entries>
- 6 <https://www.ema.europa.eu/en/human-regulatory/herbal-products/european-union-monographs-list-entries>
- 7 van Galen E. et al. Kruiden op een kruispunt. *Pharmaceutisch Weekblad* 2011; 26; 31-34
- 8 Nederlandse Voedsel- en Warenautoriteit. Factsheet-plantgiftstoffen-in-sint-janskruid-20191106
- 9 CBG campagne interactie kruiden. <https://www.cbg-meb.nl/actueel/nieuws/2019/07/06/cbg-start-campagne-over-wisselwerking-tussen-medicijnen-en-kruidenproducten>
- 10 Woerdenbag H. Kruiden(genees)middelen: informatie voor de arts en apotheker. *Pil*; 2020; 3; 33 - 37
- 11 [www.fyto.nl](http://www.fyto.nl)

## Information about Gerben Hoogsteen

Gerben Hoogsteen studied Medicine at the Erasmus University (1980-1987) and started with phytotherapy in 1989. He is working in the field of social medicine as an insurance physician and followed the post-university study Phytotherapie at the Ruhr university in Bochum, Germany (2016-2018). Since 2016, he is working within UNIİK as a herbal practitioner and from 2019 he is chairman of the NVF.

## Colophon

### More information about phytotherapy

**The Dutch Association for Phytotherapy (NVF) is a scientific association that is strong for the quality and reliability of herbal remedies, with respect for nature and wellbeing. The NVF also acts as a network for professionals. Healthcare professionals can go for questions and for deepening and advocacy to the following website: [www.fyto.nl](http://www.fyto.nl).**

**You can also find a lot of information yourself at the website of the European Medicines Agency (EMA). The EMA Committee on Herbal Medicinal Products (HMPC) released more than 150 different plant monographs since its foundation in 2004. They are for everyone free accessible and contain all the information that you need about a plant, such as preparation, indication, dosage, interactions, and side effects.**

**Of course, you can also find more information at the website of the Dutch Board of Evaluation of Medicine (CBG) when you search for 'herbs' ([www.CBG-meb.nl](http://www.CBG-meb.nl)).**

