

Trusting in traditional cures

SIR — At a recent forum, some distinguished scientists saw the rising popularity of alternative medicine as another indication of irrational thought, and the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Alternative Medicine as symptomatic of the anti-science movement¹

Although there are many non-scientific elements in traditional and herbal remedies, they have contributed to modern conventional medicine and it would be improper to dismiss them. For example, modern research suggests that traditional Chinese medicine has a scientific basis. In drug discovery, the development of new drugs based on leads from Chinese herbs is more efficient than the conventional method of random screening because it is guided by experience from a long history of clinical practice. In the United States,

several new drugs of Chinese herb origin have recently been commercially developed. These include derivatives from the antimalarial qinghaosu such as Paluther²; huperzine A, a promising drug for Alzheimer's disease³; and trichosanthin (GLQ 223) which has completed its Phase II clinical trials as an anti-HIV therapeutic^{4,5}.

Traditional Chinese medicines have worked effectively in some instances where Western therapies have failed or proved to be insufficient. In a double-blind British clinical trial, a formula of Chinese herbs has produced impressive responses in severe atopic eczema that was resistant to conventional treatment⁶. Another controlled clinical trial conducted in Japan showed that *sho-saiko-to*, a Chinese herbal formula, helps to prevent liver cancer in patients with cirrhosis⁷.

Work on traditional Chinese medicines may also bring refreshing concepts to conventional medicine. For example, an important feature of traditional Chinese medicine is the preference for composite prescriptions (combinations of herbs) over single active substances. This practice is not readily compatible with modern medical theories. However, the clinical trials described in refs 6 and 7 show that herbal combinations sometimes produce synergistic therapeutic effects on patients.

Some diseases are now resistant to con-

ventional treatment and no fundamentally new therapies have recently been developed for any major forms of cancer. In this context, I think scientific research on traditional and herbal remedies is necessary as an alternative approach to the discovery of new and better therapies, and the Office of Alternative Medicine's plan to begin some clinical trials of Chinese herbs⁸ should be implemented.

Tianhan Xue

460 Whitman Street, Suite 72,
Santa Barbara, California 93117, USA

A drop in the ocean

SIR — The discussions in *Nature* about the Brent Spar oil platform can be illuminated by a comparison with what the oceans have borne in the past. The German Navy, for example, sank some 10 million tonnes or more of shipping in the North Atlantic during the Second World War, much of it as oil in tankers and in fuel tanks in merchant and naval vessels. Goodness knows what heavy metals went to the sea floor with the cargoes of military hardware and lubricants. How can the German greens and others panic about 100 tonnes of oil in Brent Spar?

Charles Kittel

PO Box 368,
Philo, California 95466, USA

1. *Nature* **375**, 439 (1995).

2. *Wall Street Journal*, 28 August 1992, B5.

3. Borman, S. *Chem. Engng. News* 20 September 1993, 35–36.

4. Byers, V. S. *et al. Aids Res. hum. Retrovir.* **10**, 413–420 (1994).

5. Byers, V. S. *et al. Aids* **4**, 1189–1196 (1990).

6. Sheehan, M. P. & Atherton, D. J. *Br. J. Dermat.* **126**, 179–184 (1992).

7. Oka, H. *et al. Cancer* **76**, 743–449 (1995).

8. *Nature* **370**, 591 (1994).

Are you still just sitting there?

Of course we don't want you to run chromatography like this. But we do want you to do it this easily. UNICORN™ 2.00 automated control software assures you of an easier transition from one stage of development to the next. A much easier transition.

From the moment you set up your first run on UNICORN 2.00, there's no need to use any other control software. At any stage. Ever.

UNICORN 2.00 not only saves you time—there's only one program to learn—it saves you effort as well. That's because there's no transferring data between your different systems.

Just call us at 1 (800) 526 3593 in the United States, or +46 18 16 5011 from the rest of the world, to find out more about UNICORN 2.00. It truly is the only automated control software you'll ever need.



Uppsala, Sweden. (And the rest of the world)