



Where I work Damian Cohall

Racism in
science

Photographed for *Nature* by
Micah B. Rubin.

I am a pharmacologist at the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill, in Barbados. I earned my degrees at the university's Mona campus in Jamaica, where I'm from. There, I was nurtured in ethnopharmacology research that draws on folklore about the herbal practices of our ancestors from Africa and elsewhere to unearth medicinal benefits of plants.

Across the Caribbean, medicinal plants grow everywhere; they include the West Indian bay tree (*Pimenta racemosa*), shown here, as well as vervain (*Stachytarpheta jamaicensis*) and broad leaf thyme (*Plectranthus amboinicus*). Another, the Madagascar periwinkle (*Catharanthus roseus*), is the source of vinca alkaloids, compounds that include the cancer drugs vinblastine and vincristine. My group is testing extracts from that plant for anti-diabetic properties, using a rat model. The compounds inhibit the enzyme DPP-4, keeping it from disrupting insulin production.

I'm wearing a dashiki I got as a gift from the University of Cape Coast in Ghana when I visited in July to discuss opportunities for

south-to-south, cross-Atlantic collaboration. It was my first visit to the African continent. We're developing the Transatlantic Centre of Excellence for Translational Research; an early project will test whether a compound from the bark of a West African tree can treat foot ulcers in people with diabetes.

The dashiki symbolizes both my scientific journey and my rediscovery of self, in trying to understand what transpired before enslavement. When I started studying plants and their historical uses, I realized there was a greater mission – to understand the culture of our ancestors. West Africans had a major impact on Caribbean herbal practices, through generations of slavery and colonization to now.

I'm using ethnopharmacology to try to change the narrative on what traditional medicine is: to show that it is indeed scientific, and always has been.

Damian Cohall is a senior lecturer and head of preclinical and health sciences at the University of West Indies, Cave Hill, in Barbados. **Interview by Czerne Reid.**