

Highlighting the risks posed by herbal medicines to the Australian community

February 6 2017, by Luke Mcmanus



Dr Garth Maker (pictured) described the safety of herbal medicines in Australia as "very concerning." Credit: Murdoch University

Murdoch researchers have played a key role in discovering the inadequate regulation and monitoring of traditional herbal preparations in Australia, which are widely used to treat a broad range of conditions and diseases.

Led by Professor Roger Byard, chair of Pathology at the University of Adelaide, authors of a paper published in the *Medical Journal of Australia* said the lack of regulation, the inclusion of unidentified ingredients (some illegal or even toxic), and the mistaken belief that "natural" means "safe" are just some of the dangers inherent in the widespread use in Australia of traditional [herbal products](#).

The Murdoch team carried out toxicological analysis using mass spectrometry, to detect pharmaceuticals and potential toxins that may have been present in the herbal products.

"Our research set out to develop a new toolkit to study safety of herbal medicines sold in Australia. The initial findings were very concerning, and showed a substantial level of non-compliance with Australian law," said Dr Garth Maker.

"With this new publication, we have put our research into the bigger picture and sought to highlight the specific risks posed to the Australian community by herbal medicines. While the debate will no doubt continue, we believe that the evidence available demonstrates the need for both more research and a stronger approach to regulation of these products."

The proportion of the Australian population using herbal products was estimated to be 69 per cent in 2005, with research finding that more than half of those using complementary medicine (including herbal products) did not inform their doctors, thereby risking interactions with prescribed medications.

"That side effects of [herbal medicines](#) used in traditional societies have not been reported is often cited in favour of their safety, but the lack of systematic observation has meant that even serious adverse reactions, such as the kidney failure and liver damage caused by *Aristolochia* species, were unrecognised until recently," wrote the authors of the paper titled: What risks do herbal products pose to the Australian community?

More information: Roger W Byard et al. What risks do herbal products pose to the Australian community?, *The Medical Journal of Australia* (2017). [DOI: 10.5694/mja16.00614](https://doi.org/10.5694/mja16.00614)

Provided by Murdoch University

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