



Editorial

## Regulating herbal medicine.

[Regulación de la medicina herbal]

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Over the last decades, phytotherapy has attained new status in the world public health scenario. The increasing use of herbal medicines, due at least in part to the growth of the elderly population and their associated chronic diseases (Grünwald and Buettel, 1996), has made this market attractive to investors. In fact, the global market for herbal medicines stands at over USD\$ 60 billion annually (Sharma *et al.*, 2008). The World Health Organization currently recommends and encourages the inclusion of traditional herbal medicines in health care programs, as these drugs are available at low cost (WHO, 2002, 2003, 2008). Indeed, following this recommendation, and considering the worldwide trend towards such treatment, several Latin American countries have included medicinal plants and herbal medicines as major topics in their health policy agenda. On the other hand, the growth of this practice has also been cause for concern to authorities monitoring its impact on public health.

Ever since the first issue, BLACPMA has played an important role in this context, publishing advances in medicinal plant research in Latin America and further afield. The special issues dedicated to the regulation of herbal medicines [BLACPMA 6(4) in 2007 and 8(10) in 2009], as well as herb-drug interactions [BLACPMA 7(2) and 7(6) in 2008] are examples of how this journal is contributing to evidence-based herbal medicine use.

In this vein, the present issue of BLACPMA contains several interesting papers covering ethnomedicine, phytotherapy and herbal medicine in Latin America. One paper addresses the lack of regulation in a medicinal plant market, where several problems such as lack of quality, incorrect labeling and misidentified species were identified.

Another recurrent situation in Latin America is the increasing use of foreign plant species by local communities, rather than native ones. The introduction of heavily advertised, and more expensive, transnational herbal preparations, has led to a decline in the use of local traditional remedies.

However, advances in herbal drug research at a national level are combating this decline. Government financing agencies have helped to stimulate studies into the efficacy of native plant species and there is an effort by several research groups to scale up the production of local medicinal plants stimulating domesticated crop production and developing new techniques to improve the quality control and manufacturing processes for the production of herbal medicines derived from local species.

Latin American regulatory agencies have been discussing the possibility of harmonizing the regulation of herbal medicine, within the framework of the Pan American Network of Drug Regulatory Harmonization (PANDRH). Mercosur has been promoting international seminars on herbal medicines (MERCOFITO). In the last 2 months, the Brazilian health minister has published several normative documents on herbal drugs and medicines in order to improve the quality, efficacy and safety of the products available in the Brazilian market. Nevertheless, there is still plenty of work to be done in the medicinal plant field. The editorial board of BLACPMA invites Latin American and medicinal plants researchers throughout the world to contribute to the development of effective, safe and accessible phytotherapy.

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