

# COLLECTING FOLK MEDICINE OBJECTS - International Scientific Conference and Workshop VIII

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## COLLECTING FOLK MEDICINE OBJECTS

International Scientific Conference and Workshop VIII

Zagreb and Gornja Stubica, Croatia, June 20 – 23, 2007

Igor Salopek\*

Tracing medicine back to its origins, to human striving to overcome weakness and fight disease; this has never ceased to be the source of inspiration. After all, traditional medicine, being deeply rooted in accepted beliefs, ideas and methods, raises in modern man the awareness of his own persistence over time. In this sense, the International Scientific Conference "Collecting Folk Medicine Objects", held between 20 and 23 June 2007, was a precious source of inspiration to its participants, bringing new knowledge in the fields of the history of medicine, ethnology, anthropology, philosophy and museology.

The central themes of the conference were collection, safekeeping and evaluation of artefacts belonging to folk medicine, latest research on the perception of health and disease, and its development as the society developed. Calling attention to the Croatian collections in the history of medicine, Conference organisers - the Department for the History of Medicine of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts and the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb - addressed the problems faced by researchers in traditional medicine.

Even though the best part of the venue was in Gornja Stubica, a pretty little town in Hrvatsko zagorje, the Conference started with the opening of the exhibition "Health and the School" in the Croatian School Museum in Zagreb. How appropriate, as healthcare and education go

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Figure 1. Participants of the International Scientific Conference "Collecting Folk Medicine Objects" in Gornja Stubica, Croatia.

hand in hand in prevention and treatment, raising the quality of life for all. As early as the 19th century, Croatian education system recognised the importance of teaching about the human organism, as did the rest of Central European countries. A number of textbooks, collections, articles and didactic tools remain from that time.

On the second and the third day, the participants learned about the latest scientific research in history of medicine and solutions to current issues in evaluating traditional medicine. In the first session "Folk medicine - Research and Presentation", Ramunas Kondratas (Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History) stressed the importance of medical museums in education and public health, and spoke about their transformation from medical museums to museums of the history of medicine, being unable to catch up with the swift progress of the medical science in the 21st century. Darko Babić (University of Zagreb) advocated the establishment of a university museum in Zagreb, arguing that valuable academic materials require institutional care. Willem Mulder and Marie José Hoekstra (European Association of Museums for the History of Medical Sciences) presented a research which revealed that syphilis treatment with mercury in the 16th century had more fatal outcomes than has generally been believed. Tauras Mekas, Rolandas

Minevičius, and Asta Lignugariene (Museum of the History of Lithuanian Medicine and Pharmacy) spoke about the use of the parasite *Stercoralia* in traditional medicine and pharmacy, finding a connection between Lithuanian, Graeco-Roman, and Tibetan folk medicine. Sanne Witter (European Association of Museums for the History of Medical Sciences) gave a review of research in Dutch traditional medicine, and mentioned that this country boasts a variety of institutions to cover this subject.

In the second session "European Folk Medicine Collections", Baiba Podniece and Sergei Savenko presented the holdings of the Paul Stradin Museum of the History of Medicine that are highly valued among historians and researchers. Vasył Doguzov, Serhiy Mykhaýlychenko, and Alla Zamyatkina (National Museum of Medicine of Ukraine) spoke about the popular Ukrainian tradition of baths, particularly referring to the "Old Russian Bath" and its benefits in the treatment of a number of diseases. Followed a series of lectures on "Religion and Folk Medicine - Faith, Healing and Narratives", starting with Stella Fatović-Ferenčić and Marija Ana Dürrigl (Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts), who gave an interpretation of the 14th century Croatian Glagolitic heritage which brought together religion, medicine, and literature. Torunn Selberg (University of Bergen) presented a few examples of miraculous healing from the Protestant tradition, saying that these narratives also belong to folk medicine collectibles. Marijana Belaj (University of Zagreb) spoke about the Sanctuary of the Holy Mother of God in Krasno, presenting a number of artefacts that document the healing of the faithful. Nills Gilje (University of Bergen) spoke about the north European tendencies to level white and black magic in the 16th and 17th century, and about the use of psychosomatic methods in treatment of diseases.



Figure 2.  
The usual  
workshop  
atmosphere.

The last session "Medical Anthropology and Research on 'Other' Medicines" started with Nena Židov's (Slovene Ethnographic Museum) historical review of homeopathy in Slovenia, whose origins date back to the early 19th century. Tomislav Pletenac (University of Zagreb) addressed the paradoxical relationship between the body and the soul in the New Age movement. The scientific part of the programme concluded with Tanja Bukovčan's (University of Zagreb) lecture on the medical and cultural content of folk healing books, so called "ljekaruše".

The programme continued with the presentation of *Acta Medico-Historica Adriatica*, and all participants were invited to submit papers for publication in the journal. It closed with an interactive workshop on how to teach in museums and how to adjust teaching to new generations. Young audience seems to be more demanding than ever, and contemporary museums have to rise to the challenge to increase it.

The Conference's real dessert was the exhibition "Od vrta do neba – ljekovito bilje i zavjetni darovi za zdravlje (From Garden to Heaven: Medicinal Herbs and Votive Offerings to Ensure Good Health)" open in Muzej seljačkih buna in Gornja Stubica. Its authors aptly summarise the entire folk medicine by underlining the importance on medicinal herbs on one hand and of faith on the other. Exhibits such as old pharmacy tools, utensils, pharmacopoeias, illustrations of medicinal herbs, votive offerings in wax and silver, or aromatised spirits containing 37 herbs best illustrate the invaluable heritage of local medical tradition. And the overwhelming scent of medicinal herbs seems to heal the visitor instantly.

Fifteen presentations and lectures, two exhibitions, three publications, one journal presentation, and four absolutely educational and interesting days in the pleasant company of thirty participants from Europe and the United States, this is the résumé of the 8th International Scientific Conference "Collecting Folk Medicine Objects". From an interdisciplinary yet very specific perspective it offered answers to a number of questions on research in traditional medicine and on the man's attitude to disease. What is even more important, the Conference raised new intriguing questions!

### CONFERENCE PUBLICATIONS

1. Grdinić V., Dugac Ž., Biškupić Bašić I. (2007) *Od vrta do neba – Ljekovito bilje i zavjetni darovi za zdravlje*, Muzeji Hrvatskog zagorja – Muzej seljačkih buna, Gornja Stubica.
2. Rapo V. (2007) *Zdravlje i škola*, Hrvatski školski muzej, Zagreb.
3. *Collecting Folk Medicine Objects – Book of Abstracts*.