

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

GOLDENSEAL259 E. 2nd Ave.
Eugene, Ore. 97401
March 23rd, 1975Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York City, 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

The fact that the medicinal herb Goldenseal can be obtained only from one's neighborhood Health Food Store is usually sufficient to polarize people's attitudes toward it. For some, the herb's archaic-sounding name, associated with the words "health," "food," and "store," invariably conjures up visions of vats filled with boiling newts' eyes.

"What is it?" they ask, with a look suggesting they've just tasted something bitter.

"It's a root," you'll say, the root of a plant called Hydrastis canadensis."

"A Root?" --pronounced so that you see, vividly, the dank earth, the hairy protuberance.

"It comes in the form of a fine and very yellow powder," you assure them.

"Oh no, another anonymous concoction."

"As a matter of fact, Hydrastis used to be an official drug in the U.S. Pharmacopoeia and one or more of its alkaloids are used in various commercial preparations, in eye drops for example, like 'Murine.'"

"Is that so?" (absently.)

"It's good for sore and inflamed mucous membranes, it works particularly well on things like canker sores, gum abrasions and tonsillitis."

"Oh."

"You gargle it, see? I usually mix it with warm salt water and gargle it at the first sign of a sore throat and it has never failed to cure me in the year I've been using it."

"I don't get sore throats," they'll say, "my colds start in the nose."

"Ah, then you'd want to snort it," you tell them.

"What?!"

"Through your nose. I suppose you could use a dropper, but snorting salt water is a standard yogic cleansing ritual which feels terrific, particularly if you have a cold or happen to be breathing smoggy air."

"I've never heard of such a thing," they'll tell you.

"Well, 'You know, Horatio . . .'" you try.

"And what is more, it sounds disgusting."

Others have an opposite reaction. The word is, in itself, inspiring.

"Of course!" they'll exclaim, "didn't the Indians use it for absolutely everything?"

"I don't know, but it's dynamite for sore throats."

"Well a friend of mine's boyfriend takes it in capsules. It's supposed to clean the blood I think."

"You don't say?" (absently.)

"Yeah, and I've heard it cures colitis, constipation, venereal disease, ulcers and a bunch of other things I can't even remember. Small-pox or something, I don't know."

"Oh."

"I don't use it myself though, it tastes horrible."

I suppose it does. Goldenseal has an extremely bitter taste. Mixed with hot water it doesn't look particularly inspiring, either. But since it cured me of several cases of incipient tonsillitis and relieved the distracting irritation caused by a canker sore or two, I no longer find either its flavor or its appearance unpleasant.

My reason for writing to you now about Hydrastis is that the Food and Drug Administration is about to pass a regulation making it available by prescription only. When I first heard about their intention to so regulate this remedy, I was amazed and infuriated. As far as I or anyone else knew it had no known adverse side-effects and no addictive properties; no one had ever been known to overdose on it; and it didn't get you high, only well. True it has been nudged out of the U.S. and British Pharmacopoeias to make room for a vast number of modern cold preparations, but these, in my experience, have definite adverse side-effects and serve, ultimately, only to prolong the illnesses they are said to treat. For the F.D.A. to make Goldenseal a prescription drug when Dristan can be bought over the counter, seemed to me to be preverse in the extreme.

Just recently, knowing of my interest in Hydrastis, Andy Weil passed on to me the January, 1975 issue of the PharmChem Newsletter ("Well Researched, Factual Information About Illicit Drugs") which is titled: Goldenseal. It opens:

"Goldenseal has recently gained publicity from its use by heroin addicts who are patients in methadone treatment and other drug rehabilitation programs. The herb's sudden popularity centers around the claim that it prevents the detection of morphine, which is present in urine specimens after heroin use. Experiments conducted at PharmChem labs indicate this to be false."

Apparently, Goldenseal was first used by California Heroin addicts because it was thought to "flush" the body and would therefore interfere, it was supposed, with conventional urinalysis for morphine. When this made news last July (first in the San Diego Union, after which it was picked up and given major nationwide coverage) it caused a flurry of alarm in drug rehabilitation clinics and methadone maintenance centers across the country.

Located in Palo Alto, PharmChem routinely provides urinalysis services for many such clinics. A "non-profit, public-interest group," PharmChem decided to run some tests of its own. In the first experiment, urine samples from patients who had admitted recent heroin use and who were known to have used Goldenseal concomitantly, tested "positive" for morphine with the thin layer chromatographic (TLC) technique regularly used for drug screening.

In a second, more controlled test, hydrastine and berberine, the two main alkaloids of the herb, were administered in relatively high dosage, but were barely visible in subsequent urinalyses and "did not interfere with either the visualization or locations of any drugs [PharmChem] normally test[s] for."

The third study compared drug detectability with and without Goldenseal on a volunteer who took 120 mg. of codeine and 60 mg. of pentobarbital orally once each day and, during the last 2 1/2 days took, in addition,

six doses (2.6 grams each) of Goldenseal powder orally. Codeine was used because, as with heroin, the body metabolizes it to morphine. The results are depicted graphically in the PharmChem Newsletter, and summarized as follows:

"Comparing the results for the first three and a half days (no Goldenseal use) with those of the last two and a half days (Goldenseal use), it is clear that the herb does not impair the detection of morphine (or pentobarbital and codeine) in urine. . . . Results from the control samples showed clearly that neither hydrastine nor berberine interfered in any way with the thin plate chromatographic analysis, and since the daily urine volumes before and after Goldenseal were essentially the same, it appears that Goldenseal does not produce a "flushing" or diuretic effect. These studies suggest that the recent claims made for Goldenseal are false."

(Well, some of them, anyway.)

It now seems clear that in cracking down on Goldenseal, the F.D.A. is not acting from a perversity of spirit, but rather a poverty of intellect; rumors are not to be taken seriously, after all-- especially when they originate in California.

Even a cursory look at herbal texts on the uses of Goldenseal suggests that the condition for which it may not be useful does not exist. It is recommended for:

colds
la grippe
stomach and liver trouble
mucous membranes
open sores
ring worm
erysipelas.
Combined with red pepper, it strengthens the heart
improves the appetite
aids digestion.
It's good for the spinal nerves, as well as
spinal meningitis
scarlet fever, and (yes)
smallpox.

There is, as well, an impressive array of ways in which Goldenseal can be administered, as well as substances it can be used in combination with. It is also said to be good for:

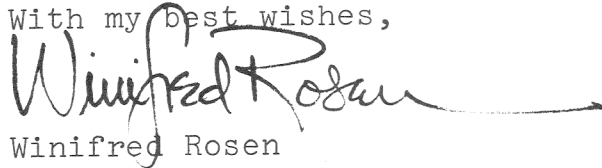
Typhoid fever
gonorrhoea
leucorrhoea
syphilis
bladder trouble
piles
hemorrhoids
prostate glands
gall bladder
pancreas
spleen
kidneys
diabetes
bathing the eyes.

I'm happy to say that I personally have only had the opportunity to test Goldenseal on colds, here and there a sore in the mouth, and an occasional skin abrasion. Invariably, it relieves painful symptoms and speeds recovery.

I use 1/2 teaspoon Goldenseal + 1/2 teaspoon salt to 8oz very warm (but not scalding) water as a gargle whenever I feel a sore throat coming on. The same concoction (but cooler) greatly relieves sinusitis if taken gently (one nostril at a time) into the nasal passages, and then expelled. The powder can be applied directly to sores with a damp Q-tip. The only thing you can do about the taste is learn to associate it with the pleasant experience of relief.

Unfortunately, the F.D.A. disregards, even frowns upon personal testimonials by ordinary citizens. It prefers to interpret the data it obtains scientifically from persons who are confined to prisons or the medical and psychiatric wards of public hospitals. But, for what it's worth, I have a dozen or so friends who regularly rely on Hydrastis for a variety of "household" ailments, and the only thing they ever complain about is the taste.

With my best wishes,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Winifred Rosen". The signature is written in dark ink and has a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right from the end of the name.

Winifred Rosen