Medicinal Plants: St. John's Wort

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St. John's Wort (SJW, Hypericum perforatum L) has long been used and enjoyed as an herbal tea. Its flowers and stems have also been used to produce red and yellow dyes. The first recorded use of SJW for medicinal purposes dates back to ancient Greece, and it has been used ever since. SJW was also used by Native Americans externally as an antiseptic, anti-inflammatory, and astringent. SJW is one of the most studied herbs with many positive results as an antidepressant.

St John's Wort is widely known as a herbal treatment for depression. In some countries, such as Germany, it is commonly prescribed for mild depression, especially in children, adolescents, and where cost is a concern. A study by the German medical insurance system conducted a clinical trial investigating the antidepressant effects of SJW by comparing it to fluoxetine. The study concluded, "…the two treatments are essentially equipotent in their antidepressant effects." Furthermore, the researchers asserted that there was "…no evidence to suggest an advantage in treating these patients with fluoxetine." However, other studies by pharmaceutical companies disagree.

Currently studies are underway for the use of SJW for alcoholism, ADHD and fibromialgia. Recent evidence suggests that daily treatment with SJW may improve the most common physical and behavioural symptoms associated with premenstrual syndrome. A research team from the Universidad Complutense de Madrid (UCM) published a study entitled, “Hypericum perforatum. Possible option against Parkinson’s disease”, which suggests that this plant with antidepressant properties has antioxidant active ingredients that could help reduce the neuronal degeneration caused by the disease.

St. John's Wort, indigenous to Europe, is a yellow-flowering, perennial herb with extensive, creeping rhizomes. It has been introduced to many temperate areas of the world and grows wild in many meadows. The common name comes from its traditional flowering and harvesting on St. John’s day, June 24th. The traditional use of the plant was to ward off evil by hanging plants over a religious icon in the house during St John's day.

SJW is generally well tolerated, with an adverse effect profile similar to placebo. Women who use the contraceptive implant Implanon are advised not to take SJW as it reduces the implant's effectiveness. It can cause photosensitivity and can be toxic to grazing animals when eaten.

Sources:
Wikipedia: Schrader E. Equivalence of a St. John's wort extract (Ze 117) and fluoxetine: a randomized, controlled study in mild - moderate depression.
International Clinical Psychopharmacology 2000; 15(2): 61-68. Universidad Complutense de Madrid: Hypericum perforatum, “Possible option against Parkinson’s disease.”

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