



Drugs versus Natural Alternatives

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There are many natural alternatives to drug therapies that actually provide better results with fewer side effects.

by Michael T. Murray, N.D.

Health care reform is a topic of considerable interest today. There are numerous problems with the current system. Millions of Americans have no health insurance, medical costs are skyrocketing, many surgical procedures are performed unnecessarily, and there is growing concern over the reliance and safety of many pre-prescription drugs.

There is also increasing evidence that many current drug therapies simply suppress symptoms and ignore the underlying disease process pathophysiology. In contrast, many natural products, including nutritional supplements, glandular products and herbal medicines, appear to address the cause of many diseases and yield superior clinical results. Unfortunately, most physicians and patients are not aware that these natural alternatives exist.

Because many natural products cannot be patented, there is no financial incentive for drug companies to market them or do research on them. A drug company could spend hundreds of millions of dollars to get a natural substance approved as a drug, but once approved, because there is no patent on the natural product, another company could market the identical product without having to spend a dime on getting the drug approved.

Obviously, this situation must be remedied, like so many of our health care problems need to be remedied.

An overview: natural products vs drugs

It is often asked "what advantages do natural medicines possess over synthetic drugs"? As a general rule, vitamins, minerals, glandular products, and herbs are less toxic than their synthetic counterparts and offer less risk of side effects. Obviously, there are exceptions to this rule.

In addition to fewer side effects, the mechanism of action of a natural medicine is often to correct the underlying cause. In contrast, synthetic drugs are often designed to alleviate the symptom or effect without addressing the underlying cause.

To illustrate the effectiveness of natural medicines over their synthetic counterparts let's examine the treatments of osteoarthritis, peptic ulcers, and prostate enlargement.

Osteoarthritis NSAIDs vs.

Research is indicating that current drug therapy of osteoarthritis, the most common form of arthritis, may be producing short-term benefit, but actually accelerating the progression of the joint destruction. Aspirin and other nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) including ibuprofen, indomethacin, and naproxen are also associated with significant side effects. Osteoarthritis has been linked to inability to repair damaged cartilage and other joint structures. It appears that as we age there is an inability to manufacture glucosamine, a critical component in healthy joints. The main action of

glucosamine on joints is to stimulate the manufacture of cartilage components. In other words, glucosamine is responsible for stimulating the manufacture of substances necessary for joint repair.

This action alone suggests a therapeutic role in osteoarthritis.

But, there is much more. Glucosamine has also been shown to exert a protective effect against joint destruction and, when given orally as glucosamine sulfate, it is selectively taken up by joint tissues to exert a powerful therapeutic effect in osteoarthritis.

Numerous double-blind studies have shown glucosamine sulfate at a daily dosage of 1.5 grams to yield as good as or even better results compared to NSAIDs in relieving the pain and inflammation of osteoarthritis. What is amazing about these results is the fact that glucosamine sulfate exhibits no pain relieving effects.

While NSAIDs offer purely symptomatic relief and may actually promote the disease process, glucosamine sulfate addresses the cause of osteoarthritis. By getting at the root of the problem, glucosamine sulfate not only improves the symptoms including pain, it also helps the body repair damaged joints. This is outstanding, but what is even more outstanding is the safety and the lack of side effects associated with oral glucosamine sulfate.

In contrast, the side effects and risks

associated with NSAID's currently used in the treatment of osteoarthritis are significant. The therapeutic margin a measure of safety, is 10-30 times more favorable for glucosamine sulfate than for commonly used NSAIDs, and no adverse side effects have been reported.

The beneficial results with glucosamine are more obvious the longer it is used. Because glucosamine sulfate is not a pain relieving substance per se, it takes a while longer to produce results. But, once it starts working it will produce much better results compared to NSAIDs.

For example, in one study that compared glucosamine sulfate to ibuprofen (Motrin), pain scores decreased faster in the first 2 weeks in the ibuprofen group, however, by week 4 the group receiving the glucosamine sulfate was doing significantly better than the ibuprofen group.



**Peptic ulcer:
Zantac or Tagamet vs. DGL**

In the treatment of peptic ulcers, a special licorice extract (DGL) has been shown to be more effective than the drugs Zantac

and Tagamet in head to head comparisons. Each year these drugs are among the most widely prescribed drugs in the United States. The two drugs have combined sales of over \$1 billion in the United States alone, and \$4 billion worldwide.

The companies that produce these drugs consider them "perfect drugs" because they are not only expensive (a full therapeutic dose usually costs about \$100.00 per month), they also have the highest relapse rate (92%) of any anti-ulcer treatment. The result? A person becomes dependent on a very expensive drug, because without it, the ulcer will likely come back.

Are these really perfect drugs?

For most people the answer is definitely no. Tagamet and Zantac are associated with a number of side effects including digestive disturbances, nutritional imbalances, liver dysfunction, disruption of bone metabolism, and the development of breasts in men. The drugs work by simply blocking the symptoms because they block the release of hydrochloric acid. They do not address the cause, which in most people is not an excessive amount of acid being produced, it is a break-down in the intestinal tract lining.

This is exactly where DGL impacts as it promotes a healthy barrier to ulcer formation. Unlike the drugs, DGL is completely safe as it is not associated with any side effects.



**BPH:
Proscar vs. Saw palmetto**

Benign prostatic enlargement (BPH) of the prostate affects nearly 50% of men over the age of forty. Currently the only approved drug for treatment of BPH is marketed under the name Proscar (finasteride), however, extract from the berries of the Saw palmetto palm has actually yielded far superior results.

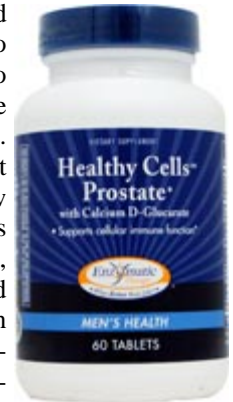
Numerous studies on the Saw palmetto extract (standardized to contain 85-95% fatty acids and sterols) at a dose of 320 mg per day has shown it to be effective in nearly 90% of patients. In contrast, Proscar is effective in reducing the symptoms in only 57%.

To further illustrate Saw palmetto extract's superiority over Proscar, let's look at the effect of both on the maximum urine flow rate, a good indicator of bladder neck obstruction due to an enlarged prostate. The following data is based on pooled data from studies on Saw-palmetto and pooled data on Proscar.

Urine flow (ml./sec.) increased by 38% with Saw palmetto treatment; whereas, urine flow only increased by 16% with the Proscar. Many studies on the Saw palmetto extract were less than 90 days; however, the final measurements were calculated as 90-day measurements. Although there are no long-term studies on Saw palmetto extract, the effect at three months (or less) is still far superior to that of the Proscar.

Clearly, the Saw palmetto extract is superior to Proscar. It is also significantly less expensive, being at least one-fourth the price of Proscar. Unfortunately, most men with BPH will never hear about the Saw palmetto berry extract. Merck has the FDA to thank for this.

Despite Saw palmetto extract's clear superiority over Proscar, in 1990 and again in 1993, the FDA rejected an application to have Saw palmetto approved in the treatment of BPH. The result is that even though Saw palmetto extract is more effective, less expensive, and much safer than Proscar, manufacturers and distributors of the extract cannot make any claims for their product:



Summary

These three examples where the natural product clearly produces superior results to conventional drug treatment clearly illustrates the importance of natural therapies. Numerous other examples also exist.

The human body has considerable power to heal itself. The role of the physician is to facilitate and enhance this process. There is increasing evidence to support the contention that the healing process is best enhanced with the aid of substances natural to the body rather than synthetic drugs.