

HERBAL MEDIC

Sam Coffman

A Green Beret's Guide to Emergency Medical Preparedness and Natural First Aid

While this is a book about herbal medicine, it fully embraces the need for a solid foundation in emergency and orthodox medicine for anyone working in health care. The heart and soul of the concept of the “herbal medic” is grounded in the idea that medicine should be as sustainable as possible, while also being accessible to everyone. The herbal medic should ideally be able to work with the medicine that grows in forests, deserts, jungles, and, of course, our own gardens. However, the herbal medic also needs a thorough understanding of disease and injury from an orthodox point of view. This is essential for acknowledging the need to seek higher medical care when a medical situation is beyond our ability to help.

However, in my experience there is a helpful application from the world of plant medicine for nearly every illness or injury. It might be herbs to help with nausea from chemotherapy, or an herbal formula that is far more effective than expensive pharmaceuticals for a viral infection. It could be herbs to help a bone fracture heal or herbs to help with the respiratory difficulty of asthma. The spectrum of health issues that can be addressed with herbal medicine is huge. So too is the spectrum of effectiveness, depending on the condition, underlying factors (e.g., nutrition, lifestyle, age, health conditions), what herbs are used, and how those herbs are used.

With that in mind, it is likely that the readers of this book will come from many backgrounds. Some may be doctors or otherwise licensed health care providers. Some may be clinical herbalists. Some may be folks who are concerned with preparedness for disaster. Some may be herbal hobbyists who are just starting on their own journey to explore plant medicine. Whatever your background, the purpose of this book is to define and teach all aspects of being an herbal medic, both in the field and at home. Outside of basic first-aid skills, the medicine we will discuss is specifically plant medicine. I believe that the herbal medic should be prepared to be the primary caregiver not just in the first few minutes of an injury or illness but for the first few hours or days, and potentially even for weeks and maybe months, depending on the situation. That's why this book is written primarily for an audience living and working in remote locations or interested in preparing for post-disaster scenarios. That said, a foundation of practical herbalism is also very useful around the average home, and the information provided here can be used by professionals of all background and training, from doctors, nurse practitioners, and nurses to clinical herbalists. But above all, this book is intended to help anyone and everyone who desires greater self reliance and sustainability in their own health care.

Using This Book

You can read this book from cover to cover, and you can also use it as a reference manual. The index, glossary, and materia medica offer easy access to definitions, explanations of concepts, first-aid instructions, and plant profiles. It is impossible to teach herbal medicine concepts without first introducing certain cultural understandings and vocabulary from the world of plant medicine. This is true whether you are working with trauma, acute or chronic illness, or recovery from trauma or surgery. The first thing you must realize is that in the tradition of Western or orthodox medicine, our understanding is shaped primarily by pharmaceutical medicine.

Plant medicine arises from an entirely different context of holistic, multifaceted healing. As an example, even though aspirin is derived from constituents found in willow bark (*Salix* spp.), you can't simply apply willow bark in the same way you would administer aspirin. From the perspective of plant medicine, using a single constituent—in this case, salicylic acid—out of the thousands of constituents found in willow bark is nowhere near as effective as using the whole plant, understanding the mechanism of inflammation, and taking advantage of the ways in which many different herbs can work through various pathways in the body to help heal inflammation. This book is designed to create a

foundation and then build on it. Part 1 concentrates on orthodox topics such as creating first-aid kits, bandaging and splinting, and supporting musculoskeletal injuries.

Part 2 explores some of the most important aspects of working with herbs, beginning with a basic understanding of the body. How do we approach an upper respiratory tract infection versus a urinary tract infection? Can one herb have different effects on different organs? What are the most effective ways to help different types of tissue heal? How do we make medicine from herbs? What is a formula, and how do we figure out which herbs to combine for a specific formula? Understanding the process of disease provides a foundation for understanding the larger process of working with illnesses and injuries. A well-designed healing protocol may involve not just herbal medicine but also lifestyle adjustments, nutrition, stress management, and more. As we look at organ systems, we will also talk about the causative factors in disease—in particular, chronic disease.

First aid is the mainstay of the herbal medic. First aid is to acute illness and injury what nutrition and an understanding of organs and pathophysiology are to chronic illness. And so Part 3 covers topics that can be described as “herbal first aid in action.” Here you’ll learn how to assess and treat injuries, infections, illnesses, and more. It is vital

that you have some understanding of how to implement these methods in a post-disaster or remote environment in order to be an effective herbal medic both in the field and at home.

In Part 4 we move into the *materia medica*, a list of plants that are used medicinally. It includes 70 herbs that I use frequently, listed by common name. Information includes the parts of the plant used, medicinal uses, and preparation/administration protocols. Most are native to or can be cultivated in North America, though some are found more commonly outside this continent. All of them can also be purchased as dried herbs in bulk from herb suppliers.

Why “Herbal Medic”?

I’ve been fascinated with the concept of the herbal medic for over two decades. Medics respond to any type of complaint of someone seeking medical care in the field, including trauma or acute illness. A medic—by my own definition and experience—can be a first responder, a doctor, a nurse, a counselor, a paramedic, a critical care health provider, or any combination of these. Aside from stabilizing injuries and wounds and providing initial treatment for any range of health care issues, the medic also has to provide continued advanced first aid and emotional support, while documenting a patient’s condition and care. The medic monitors the patient until handing them off to higher care. An *herbal* medic

can perform many or even all of those tasks using plant medicine instead of pharmaceuticals. Herbal medics must be able to identify plants, know how to extract medicine from them, and understand how to apply those medicines correctly.

Knowledge of herbal medicine is useful around the home, on the trail, and in the wilderness. It can be vital in places where pharmaceutical medicine is limited. And it can be life-saving in post-disaster situations, when people are desperate, the rule of law has been abandoned, and food, water, and medicine (not necessarily in that order) are among the first things to be looted or taken by force. In any austere environment, even if you do have pharmaceutical medicine available, you have to know how to administer it correctly and how to deal with rationing what you use, which can create all sorts of unexpected issues.

Plant medicine is truly a “living” medicine. While we can, to a limited extent, break down the actions of the constituents inside the plant, we are not able to quantify the effects of living medicine—sometimes called vitalism—in the same way. The efficacy of any herb will vary depending on where it grows, the soil and other conditions it grows in, how and when it is harvested, and how it is prepared, formulated, and dosed. An herbalist must have a relationship with and understanding of plant life and its interaction with the

human species. Human beings have coexisted with, coevolved with, and relied upon plant food and medicine for the entire duration of the existence of our species.

That relationship is deeper than we can duplicate with a pharmaceutical drug, a vitamin tablet, or even an encapsulated herb. That relationship is vital for our health, in fact. As the myriad chronic diseases and inflammation-related disorders in our population right now show us, our health is intrinsically connected to the health of the soil and the plants around us. Herbal medicine offers us a rooted connection back to the world that we rely on for our food, our clean air, our clean water, and, of course, our plant medicine.