

Rhino horn is **not** medicine

A view from the Register of Chinese Herbal Medicine

It's been a few months since I nervously stood in front of the delegates at Save the Rhino's Rhino Mayday event in London. As President of the Register of Chinese Herbal Medicine UK (RCHM), I was perhaps someone with a slightly different background to everyone else at the conference. However, part of the reason for my speaking was to highlight RCHM's strongly held position against the illegal trade in endangered species.

Gary Minns | President, Register of Chinese Herbal Medicine

As with all cultures around the world, the Chinese have used herbs to treat ailments for many millennia. The traditional way in which the Chinese administer these herbs ('herb' in this context can include plant, mineral and animal parts) is to boil various combinations of herbs and then drink the resulting decoction (or 'tea').

The first reference to rhino horn (xijiao/Cornu Rhinoceri) within Chinese herbal medicine comes from a book called

be any demand for rhino horn. In fact, it has been illegal to medicinally use rhino horn in China since 1993 (fortunately, mercury fell into disuse many centuries earlier).

However, in April 2012, Reuters estimated the 'street value' of rhino horn to be US\$65,000 per kg. For comparison, the spot price of gold at that time was US\$52,500 per kg.

So what is fuelling the demand?

The answer to this question seems to be two-fold: firstly, an erroneous and ridiculous belief by some that rhino horn can help treat cancer (it absolutely cannot and the best guess seems to be that this crazy myth was started by rhino horn poachers/smugglers in order to boost demand); secondly, it seems the illegal trade in rhino horn has now gone far beyond the limited medicinal market, with the major problem now appearing to be the use of rhino horns as extravagant business gifts. I can only really comment on the first aspect. Tests conducted on rhino horn have never shown any cancer-curing effects (nor aphrodisiac effects, which is often cited as use for rhino horn).

RCHM firmly believes that Chinese herbal medicine, administered by a qualified practitioner, has many medicinal benefits. Numerous pieces of research seem to support this theory. We also strongly condemn the illegal trade in endangered species and have a strict policy prohibiting the use of any type of endangered species (plant and animal) by any of our members. Furthermore, UK law means it is illegal to use animal and/or mineral products in unlicensed medicines (a vast majority of herbal medicines come into this category) and there are numerous plant substitutes readily (and cheaply) available. Although the use of rhino horn is not an issue within the UK, as residents of the Global Village it is something that affects us all. Therefore, the sooner we can get this message across the better: rhino horn is not medicine.



Shennong bencao jing (Divine Farmer's Materia Medica), which allegedly dates to circa 3,000 BCE but can be verified to around at least 300 BCE. It is worth noting

that the Daoist influence of the time meant such delights as mercury, cinnabar and realgar were also included in the text as legitimate medicinals.

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The *Shennong bencao jing* describes rhino horn as mainly treating 'influx of evil ghosts, eliminates evils, prevents confusion and oppressive ghost dreams'. I'm pleased to say that practitioners are not generally called upon to treat such symptoms these days and so there should no longer

About RCHM

The RCHM was set up in 1987 to regulate practice and teaching of Chinese Herbal Medicine (CHM) in the UK. It now has over 450 members and works with consumer and patient organisations to ensure public safety and high standards of CHM in the UK. RCHM is working with the UK government towards statutory regulation of herbal medicine for 2013. www.rchm.co.uk