



# The evolution of Irish Herbal medicine & where Codex can take it

## Sections

**01** Irish Herbal medicine

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Ireland

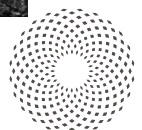
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**02** Where do Bia & Codex  
come into this?

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Bia

03



## The evolution of Irish herbal medicine & where Codex can take it

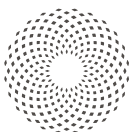
Traditional knowledge is the birthplace of our scientific future and Irish traditional medicine is one of these foundations. Ireland is fortunate in having both an indigenous and learned tradition and, as scholars, we can deduce some knowledge of indigenous oral medical tradition from Irish legends, the Annals (of the Four Masters) and legal texts. Our oldest surviving law tracts date from the 8th century and in these we find that medical care was given to everyone in the community and it was of a very high standard ... including lots of celery. Those of the higher ranks in society could avail of herbs and spices from abroad but those lower down the ranks had to make do with the local *luibh gort* or herb field.

In Ireland, the profession of medicine was already well established by the 10th century and was exercised by the hereditary medical families, including the Dunleavys, O Shiels, and Lanes. These families "were responsible for the organization and regulation of the medical schools, the formulation and development of the curriculum and the practical training of students" (Nic Dhonnchadh 2000, p.217). They enjoyed a high legal status as well as the hereditary tenure of lands in return for medical care (ibid. 2000). The care of the sick, their diet, and the compensation due in the event of injury, are all carefully described in the *Bretha Crólige* and the *Bretha Déin Chécht* both of which are part of the great collection of Irish customary law known as the *Sheanchus Mór*, which dates from the first half of the 8th century (Kelly 2001, Binchy 1938). The recognition of this professional medical class is also evident in the acknowledged expertise of its practitioners such as Niall Ó Clachan from Donegal and in the various positions Irish physicians obtained both in Ireland and Europe (Hayes 1942, 1945). These hereditary physicians translated and transcribed the Latin medical texts, emanating from Salerno and Montpellier, into Irish, so as ensure that they and their students were at the forefront of knowledge. Many of these manuscripts have never been edited, let alone translated, and are still hidden away, unexamined, on library shelves, a treasure trove of knowledge awaiting discovery. There are some glimpses of the indigenous oral tradition within the medical manuscripts of the Ó Cuinn manuscript written in 1415, where there are 22 herbs mentioned that do not seem to have a European provenance.

After the collapse of the old Gaelic order in the first half of the 17th century, this learned tradition of medicine also faded out of existence. However, not all the physicians left the country with their chieftains and down through the centuries those physicians, who remained, passed on their cures to each succeeding generation. I know two healers, descended from the same family, where 9-10 generations ago, (1600s) there were two children, a boy and a girl. One got the cure for psoriasis and the other for skin cancer. They still practise their cures today, without payment, but are fearful of the future due to lack of any legal protection.



1. He received his initial medical education from the Dunleavys, who were the hereditary physicians to O'Donnells of Ulster. He left Ireland in 1602 and later became Professor of Medicine in Toulouse and physician to the King of France. In 1646 he became the leading Professor of Medicine in Bologna and published a system of medicine in two volumes. The date of his death is unknown.



### Where do Bia and Codex come into this?

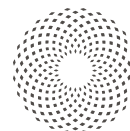
They are especially important because through its advisory committee Codex Beauty has a platform which may develop scientific knowledge to build on tradition. It is important to realize that the pharmacy used in the past may be more significant than the plant. For example, Tu Youyou, from China, was one of the co-recipients of the Nobel prize in 2015 for her work on *Artemesia*. It was through her reading of the ancient methods of the preparation for this herb that she was finally able to prove its anti-malarial properties, as current scientific knowledge, or pharmacy, did not support her thesis. It is far too easy to dismiss the therapeutic, or other, uses of an herb because our scientific methodology does not prove it. The problem may be our knowledge, not the knowledge gathered and refined over centuries of use. A trained eye can access these ancient tomes and through collaboration with modern scientific investigation utilize the knowledge now gathering dust on library shelves. We must therefore recognise that our current methodological tools may need improving and have the humility to realise that it us and not our forebears who may be lacking.



The O'Cuinn manuscript of 1415 mentions the use of comfrey for broken bones. In Irish it is called *Lus na gcnámh briste*, which means exactly that, but the account from 1415 adds other herbs, such as meadowsweet, which contains salicylic acid, to the formula. Similarly, the use of *slán-lus*, or plantain, in this formula would have drawn out any poison. These other herbs can be seen to augment or curb some of the constituents in comfrey, such as regenerating the skin cells too quickly. In 1938 we see a child in Co. Clare recounting the use of comfrey for lung and chest troubles as well as a poultice on ulcers (Volume 0625, Page 021), and these are uses not yet researched today.

Today, we see the allantoin present in comfrey as useful for boosting the growth of new skin cells, moisturizing and softening the skin and acting as a keratinolytic. Being a keratinolytic it softens keratin, which is a tough, inflexible protein found in the outer layer of the skin. By softening keratin, allantoin allows the skin to hold onto water better. This makes it moister, softer, and better hydrated. Also, the rosmarinic acid present in comfrey has antioxidant effects and helps to protect the skin from UV damage. Modern science has therefore allowed us to look at individual constituents, but not complexity. Yet, it is the marriage of the complexity of the tradition with science that will break new ground in the future. The scientific foundation of Bia in Ireland will allow Codex Beauty to develop this avenue, and expand the line to new products such as juices, wines, ointments, poultices, and of course natural medicine for many of the herbs currently used in the Bia line of beauty products. All these possibilities are there in the Irish tradition. But that is the future. Now we are celebrating this amazing range of beauty products that has successfully built on tradition ... may it be the start of a rewarding collaboration between our past, present and future for many years to come.

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## References

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