



Bug drugs

TRADITIONAL MEDICINE: For centuries, Northeasterners have used insects in potions and remedies to cure a host of ailments. Now researchers plan to systematically record them

Story By Pongpet Mekloy © The Post Publishing Public Co., Ltd. 2000

The above remedies do not belong to witches in fairy tales; they exist in real life. Although it's true their efficacy has never been proven in medical labs, it has been tested by time.

For generations, rural villagers in many parts of Isan-Thailand's northeastern region have been relying on such traditional cures. And it would be a pity if today's Thais let such precious wisdom die away without taking a good look at it.

Researcher Kanvee Viwatpanich, of The National Institute of Thai Traditional Medicine, observed such folk healings a few years ago



while he was researching the use of insects in the Isan diet (his paper was entitled *Insects: A Nutritional Anthropological Study*). Now he is part of the institute's team formed to study the relationship between the insects and health of rural people. The new research project, entitled *Medicinal Insects: A Study of Thai Wisdom in Traditional Medicine*, was recently approved for funding by the National Research Council.



"Upcountry people still live in natural surroundings. Among other things, insects are a part of their lives. And that's especially true for Isan villagers-insect dishes and insect hunting are part of their way of life," explained Mr Kanvee. "And they don't just eat the bugs to cure hunger but to fight against ailments as well." According to the researcher, use of insects and their by-products-honey and beeswax, for example-are common in traditional medicine. In some cases, these little creatures are used singly while in some others they are mixed with herbs and other natural ingredients. Sometimes they are used when still alive and sometimes only after being heated in a specific fashion.



Who knows, certain insect remedies might prove to be as worthy as the herbal versions. And they will be another good reason why we should respect our roots and safeguard certain traditional ways of life rather than blindly joining the globalisation bandwagon which will eventually rob Thailand of its self-sufficiency.

In many cases, the insect medicine has to be consumed. But, said Mr Kanvee, there are also some treatments which are designed only for external use.



Wasp larvae mixed with a little bit of its nest serve as effective antidote to wasp sting. The pain will be gone in a few minutes after you rub this on the wound.

"Like when red ants are used

to treat cuts," he gave as an example. "Sometimes villagers happen to get cuts in the paddy fields or in the forest where alcohol is not available, and they need something to disinfect the fresh wound. What they do is simply drop a few red ants onto the wound. The alarmed ants then react by secreting acid which, although it adds a great deal of pain to the existing injury, is believed to help keep the wound clean." "This kind of practice may sound outrageous to most city people, but sometimes it really works," said Mr Kanvee, adding he had experienced the miracle of some of these insect remedies himself.



Researcher Kanvee Viwatpanich.

"Once during a visit to a village in the Northeast I was stung by a wasp and the village medicine man helped rid me of the pain by applying some sticky stuff on the wound. It was a mixture of crushed wasp larvae and material from the wasp nest," he said. "Normally, this kind of pain would take a balm at least 15 minutes to make me feel better. But using the wasp grubs I felt fine within five minutes!" Mr Kanvee said the study on medicinal insects was initially set to start next year but with the funding approval the research team is likely to begin their work earlier.

"The first thing to do is to compile all the recorded medicinal recipes that involve insects and their products," he said, adding this is done by going through texts copied from old palm-leaf inscriptions. "These texts are already available at the National Library. But what makes it tough is that old documents like these are not just difficult to read, but also they have no index-so the only way to find what you're looking for is to carefully check every page. And there certainly are a lot of inscriptions waiting for us." The other part of the study is field work. "By spending time with traditional doctors and villagers we will have the chance to learn about the medicinal use of insects in real life situations," he said. "We plan to cover all the four regions within two years-six months for each region. Definitely, that's going to involve a lot of travelling." While gathering the information, Mr Kanvee and other researchers will also have to collect specimens of the insects and have them identified by entomologists. "Some insects have different names depending on the place they are found. This is the only way to get things straight," he said.

Once finished, the study will bring together a wealth of wisdom Thai people have developed throughout centuries. Putting the knowledge to the scientific test will be the next step.