

Bridging Medical Systems (Link: <http://syndicatemizzou.org/articles/show/62>)



By LuAnne Roth

After thirty years of research focused mainly on exploring biochemical and genetic questions in the laboratory, William Folk, Professor of Biochemistry at MU, has been pushing himself outside of the comfort and controlled environment of the lab with his newest project. As co-investigator on this nascent initiative, Folk explains its significance for him in moral and political terms—that is, how the reign of South Africa’s apartheid government contributed to the rapid and devastating spread of HIV in Africa, the epicenter of the AIDS pandemic. In South Africa, where an estimated 5 million people are infected by the disease, Folk feels an obligation to do what he can to help remedy this devastating statistic. With this call in mind, Folk and Professor Quinton Johnson of the University of the Western Cape have orchestrated a large collaboration of over a dozen colleagues from universities in South Africa and the United States, generously funded by a \$4.4 million grant from the National Institute of Health’s National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine. Creating a virtual center, which they’ve named The International Center for Indigenous Phytotherapy Studies (TICIPS—pronounced “Tee-Sips”), the center seeks to understand traditional healing practices in South Africa in terms of their safety and usefulness in treating infectious diseases such as tuberculosis and AIDS and the conditions associated with them.

Having first received an NIH planning grant several years ago, the team has completed phase one of the project, which involved establishing the administrative structure for TICIPS and conducting a small-scale clinical trial of the safety of the South African plant *Sutherlandia* (or *Lessertia frutescens*) in healthy adults. During the first year of TICIPS, they will focus on developing the protocol for the larger study of *Sutherlandia*, with feedback from both South African and U.S. ethics committees, as well as putting in place the necessary infrastructure, staff,

and equipment in a hospital located outside of Durban, South Africa. The actual clinical trial of the plant on humans will then take place during the second - fourth years of the project.

Folk emphasizes the crucial need for trust with this kind of undertaking. In fact, this project simply wouldn't be possible at all were it not for the nearly two decades of trust built between the University of Missouri—Columbia and the University of the Western Cape. As TICIPS is “a center without borders,” protocols for the research must go through multiple levels of ethical and scientific scrutiny in both the U.S. and South Africa. “We have the strong support of the South African traditional healers,” explains Folk. With the traditional healers themselves as active agents in this conversation, and intellectual property rights specialists and botanical conservationist groups carefully watching out for the rights of the indigenous healers and the plant itself, this research collaboration is truly a first-of-its-kind. Aside even from the ethical matters involved, this represents “the first significant effort outside the boundaries of the U.S.” to do a study of “nonorthodox” medicine (a term used to distinguish traditional healers and alternative medicine from the mainstream Western-trained “orthodox” medical practices) in a way that attempts to avoid the type of exploitive relationship many colonized nations have come to suspect in their dealings with the West. If the project goals are realized, the center hopes to tap into the traditional healers' extensive knowledge of the medicinal properties of plants that could potentially be useful to treat AIDS, secondary infections, and immune deficiencies in individuals in the U.S. as well. “TICIPS creates a unique bridge between Western and African medicine systems,” Johnson is quoted as saying, “with the aim of bringing hope, health, and healing to all.”