



Geraniums Stop That Cough

In 1879 Charles Henry Stevens received some bad news. He was diagnosed with tuberculosis, a matter of life and death in his time and his hometown of Birmingham. The best advice his physician could give him was to take a trip to South Africa. The local climate there was deemed more congenial to the condition of the young mechanic.

In South Africa Stevens met the healer Mike Kijitse who proceeded to fix him a drink from the mashed roots of a small flower. The results were astounding: a mere three months later, the patient felt himself fully restored to health. He asked Kijitse for the recipe and tested the magic potion successfully on several other tuberculosis patients right there in South Africa. Back in England his doctor pronounced him cured. As for the story about a brew from the root of the Cape Pelargonium, a type of geranium found only in South Africa and Lesotho – he just shook his head.

But Stevens believed he knew better. He promoted the new medicine as »Stevens' Consumption Cure« albeit without much success. The medical establishment of the United Kingdom pretty much agreed that he was a quack.

Not so the Geneva mission doctor Adrien Secheyay, who in the 1920s used an extract from the South African miracle flower to treat patients, apparently with considerable success. In the thirties, the reputation of the Cape Pelargonium and its amazing powers reached the Berlin Charité-Hospital. There the plant tested so successfully that a company from Regensburg, founded in 1923 as JSO- Werk by pharmacist Johannes Sonntag, began marketing a Pelargonium-extract as a readymade cure. Today the company, renamed ISO-Arzneimittel, is part of the Dr. Willmar-Schwabe consortium and its Cape Pelargonium-based medication is distributed under the brand name UMCKALOABO.

Pelargonias are part of the geranium family. UMCKALOABO is based on two South African wild species, *Pelargonium sidoides* and *Pelargonium reniforme*. But the plant components alone do not constitute a cure. The traditional knowledge regarding their curative effects is an integral and indispensable part of the final product. On the marketing web site for UMCKALOABO we are told: „an effective remedy comes to us not by way of the research facilities of a giant pharmaceutical company, but from the savannas of South Africa. From the root extract of the Cape Pelargonium – used for its curative properties by Zulu tribes for centuries – German plant scientists developed the drug. (...) The deep understanding of the South African plant healers is a thousand years old. The precise knowledge concerning the application and effectiveness of local plants for the treatment of diseases is passed down through the generations.“

The entire UMCKALOABO business ultimately rests on this knowledge. But while profits are stacking up in Germany and Switzerland, the bearers of the traditional knowledge in South Africa and Lesotho get nothing. In 2006, German pharmacies sold 80 million Euros worth of UMCKALOABO bottles, up from 55 million in 2005, and 8 million in 2002.

The use of genetic resources and traditional knowledge requires the prior informed consent of the providers - the bearers of traditional knowledge and the countries providing the genetic resources. Access has to be based on mutually agreed terms. The biodiversity convention, a binding agreement of international law signed at the world summit for sustainable development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and ratified by South Africa in 1995, stipulates as much.



Meanwhile, with the UN-Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples of September 2007, the international community has recognized the sovereignty of indigenous peoples and local communities over their traditional knowledge and the respective genetic resources.

In the case of Cape Pelargonium and their use in the manufacture of UMCKALOABO the rules set out in these agreements were obviously not followed. Neither the bearers of the traditional knowledge nor the South African government ever gave their prior informed consent as required under the biodiversity convention and the South African bioprospecting laws.

Now the people of South Africa are demanding their rights. They have filed challenges with the European Patent Office against two patents of the Schwab Group, through which the company is seeking to secure the exclusive use of Pelargonium species. They are demanding reparation payments and restoration of the badly damaged Pelargonium populations. They no longer accept their role as cheap Pelargonium gatherers that would reduce them in good post-colonial fashion to simple providers of raw materials.

Instead they are fighting for recognition of their traditional knowledge and the right to freely determine the conditions of use for their knowledge and the respective genetic resources – as promised in the UN-Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples approved in September 2007.

Note: This factsheet is based in part on the report “Knowledge not for sale: Umckaloabo and the Pelargonium patent challenges” published by the African Center for Biosafety in May 2008.