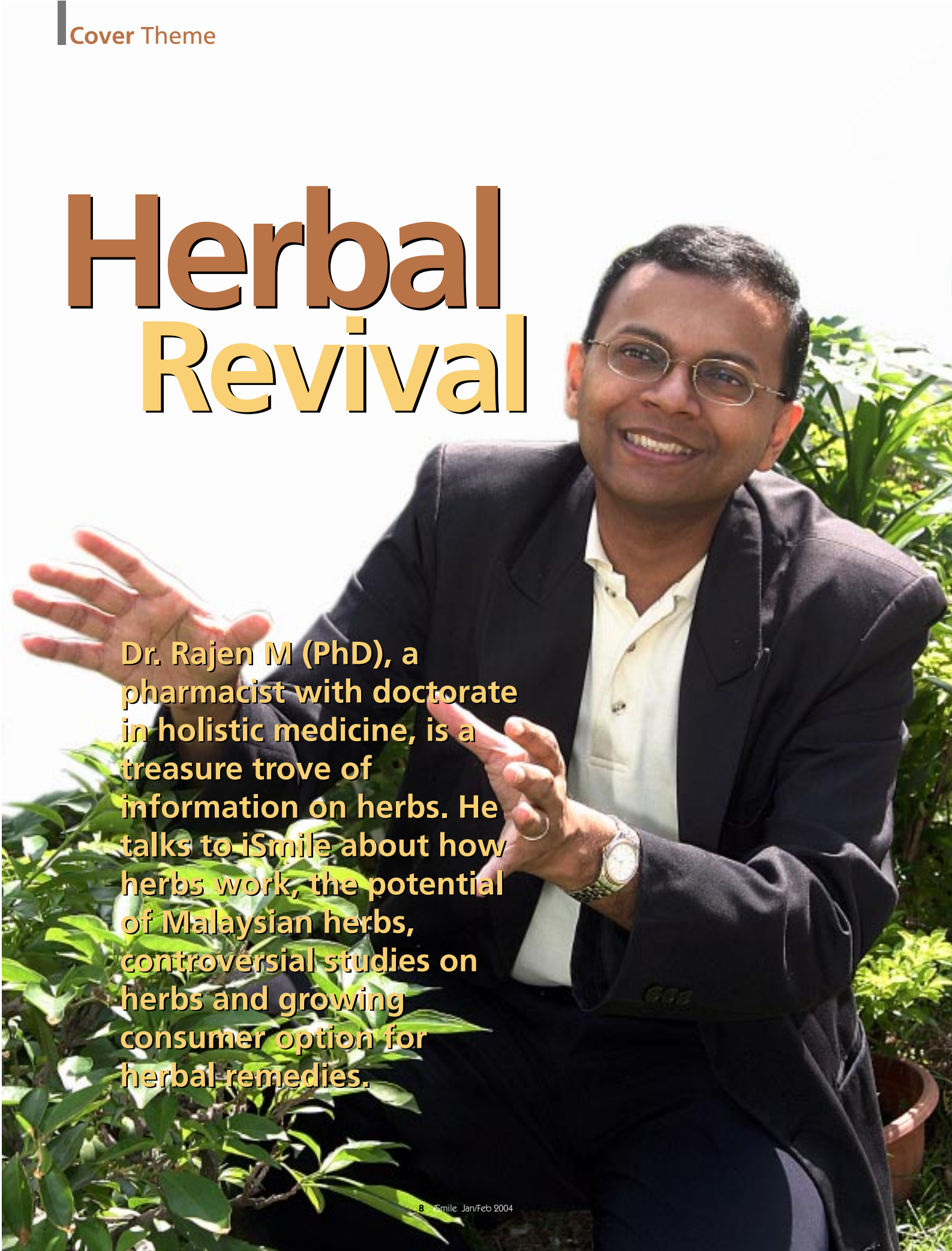


Herbal Revival

A photograph of Dr. Rajen M (PhD) in a garden. He is wearing a dark suit jacket over a light-colored polo shirt, glasses, and a watch. He is smiling and gesturing with his hands as if speaking. The background is filled with lush green plants and foliage.

Dr. Rajen M (PhD), a pharmacist with doctorate in holistic medicine, is a treasure trove of information on herbs. He talks to iSmile about how herbs work, the potential of Malaysian herbs, controversial studies on herbs and growing consumer option for herbal remedies.

A herb is a plant with medicinal or healing benefits. It can be a food like ginger and onions or a spice like cardamom. Herbal remedies can come from various parts of a plant like leaves, flowers, stems, roots, seeds, fruit and bark. The earliest written accounts of herbal remedies come from India as well as China and dates back to 3000BC. Humans, from ancient times, used them for various applications like to stop bleeding, aid digestion and even promote breast milk.

How do herbs work? Researchers and drug companies define the active ingredients that carry health promoting benefits. One in four of all modern drugs is based on herbs. Aspirin, for instance, comes from the bark of the willow bark tree.

Others simply attribute the healing power of herbs to nature. Deepak Chopra, in his best-selling book, *Perfect Health* describes herbal plants as 'packets of vibrational energies'. These plants trap solar power and retain it in their own structures. When consumed, the energy goes to the parts of the body where energy is not aligned properly. Herbs, therefore, heal by aligning energies in our bodies. This reasoning is in line with the Chinese Traditional Medicine and Ayurveda, which refer to various herbs and their applications in balancing internal energies called *qi* and *dosha* respectively.

Dr. Rajen M. (PhD), a pharmacist who holds a doctorate in holistic medicine and a director of the Malaysian Herbal Corporation, a Government think tank which will spearhead the development of the herbal industry, agrees that nature knows more than science. He quotes James Duke, former Director of Ethnobotany at the US Department of Agriculture, 'There is a remedy for every ailment in herbs'. Rajen believes that our bodies' organs are receptors of the healing force trapped in herbs.

The Power of Herbs

The most amazing story about the power of herbs must be the roots of **Kamunting Cina (Vinca rosea)**. It is commonly called Periwinkle. In fact, the flower is used in the MAKNA (see inside story on Health NGO) logo. The modified root extracts are a breakthrough treatment for childhood leukaemia.



The bark of a tree growing in Sarawak is showing promise in Stage 3 trials for AIDS. The tree commonly called **Bintangor (Calophyllum species)** is being studied in a project carried out by a leading American university and the Sarawak State Government.



Consumer Choice

Rajen sees a strong herbal revival in face of the growing concerns about the efficacy and side effects of synthetic drugs. 'The recent revelation about bad manufacturing practices of modern drug companies have added to the concerns,' he stresses. On top of this, he says that bad publicity about herbal remedies has not dampened consumers' interest in herbs. Rajen points out that some adverse publicity are unfounded, as they are based on research studies which were not conducted properly. For instance, he disagrees with one study which noted that St. John's Wort does not work for depression.

Unfavourable Research



There was a study about **St. John's Wort (hypericum perforatum)** – a herb used for depression that was published by *The New England Journal of Medicine* in 2002. It concluded that the herb does not work for this condition. Immediately, there was a media buzz decrying this herb – a leading Western herb with centuries of use. Upon examining the full paper,

Rajen was shocked to note that the researchers tried the herb on patients with major depression. He notes that this herb has never been used for a severe disease like this. 'More interestingly, the trial was funded by a leading drug company with a drug for depression!' Rajen says.

Similarly, another study published in the *Journal of American Medical Association* (2002) showed that **ginkgo biloba** does nothing for memory. After examining the study, Rajen found out that the duration was just for 6 weeks. He explains that even memory enhancing drugs backed by state-of-the-art research do not work that quickly.

A trial of a popular immunity boosting herb, **Echinacea purpurea**, reported in *The New England Journal of Medicine* (2003) showed that it does nothing for immunity. Analysing the trial report, Rajen discovered that the trial used flower extracts. "However, any herbalist worth his salt knows that all the active ingredients of this herb lie in the bark and root!" he clarifies.



Rajen believes that 'the power of the pocket' is the driving force behind the resurgence of alternative medicine and herbal remedies, especially in Western countries. He refers to one study where three out of four Britons have tried alternative medicine. These were educated and well-to-do women. "They pay for them, out of their pockets," Rajen explains, meaning that they want options and will pay for whatever they believe is best for their own health.

In Malaysia, we see the trend of two particular groups of consumers. One group will opt for 'quick fixes' by taking commercially manufactured drugs. Only when their health situation does not improve do they turn to alternatives such as herbs. Conversely, the other group will choose herbs first, as they believe herbs are cheaper and have little side effects. If their health problem does not improve, they may later visit the clinic or hospital.

Is there a 'clash' or disagreement between herbs and Western medicine? The debate continues. Rajen notes that he has yet to come across any report that substantiates this 'clash'. Some consumers make their own decisions. In cancer treatment, for instance, he believes that many patients are taking herbs in addition to the traditional chemotherapy and radiotherapy treatments. 'It is best for patients to tell their doctors that they are taking herbs. The doctors should also be open-minded and not object outright,' is his view.

Herbal Bandwagon

Pharmaceutical companies have long opened their doors to researching herbs and spending millions of dollars to pioneer modern drug discoveries. They search for molecules, extract the active ingredients and modify them to create synthetic variations that can be patented. These patents have created an avalanche of herbal preparations. Instead of just dried plants, herbal formulas now come in many forms such as paste, powder, pellets, juice, capsules, sprays, cream and slow-release plasters.

On the other side of the coin, consumers are lost in the sea of herbal products, and some have been deceived by false claims. The word 'herbal' has been placed not only on supplements but

also on ordinary products such as teas, toothpastes and drinks. Rajen's advice is that consumers get information on active ingredients, concentration and method of extraction from qualified professionals. "The purest form of a herb is the best. But you must know how to use it and which part of the plant is suitable for what ailment," he says. "If you do not know, it is best to go for the standardised herbal formulas recognised by herbalists," he explains.

Age Matters



*A herb can have different benefits at different times of its life cycle. A classic example is the herb used for cholesterol normalisation – **Guggul (Commiphora mukul)**. The young plant is used for children. It has anabolic effects. It promotes weight gain and growth. A 5-year old plant is used to lower cholesterol and even reduce weight.*

The Ministry of Health Malaysia is serious about improving the standard of herbalists and traditional medicine practitioners.

Consumers in Malaysia will be getting better protection against dubious products with an official register of traditional medicines and alternative medicine practitioners expected by 2005.

Malaysian Herbs' Potential

Rajen reveals that Malaysia is a treasure trove for herbs. The country is blessed in that one in eight plants known to man is grown here and Malaysia ranks 12th largest in the world in terms of bio-diversity.

Herbal remedies have definitely crossed cultural divides in Malaysia. Rajen states that 'Herbs are God's gifts to us. They do not belong to any race, culture and religion.' He estimates that 80% of buyers of ayurvedic herbs are



Guggul tree

Chinese. The Indians and Malays are visiting Chinese *sinsehs* for common ailments. *Jamu* is also used by non-Malays.

Another trend unique to Malaysia is the 'inter-marriage of herbs'. The three major ethnic groups – Malay, Chinese and Indians – have a rich heritage of herbs based on their respective cultures. Just as some Malaysians have inter-married, so have some herbs intermingled and gained favour among various ethnic groups. Rajen points out that there are 14 species of *pegaga* in this country – unique to Malaysia.

Malaysian Heritage

Pegaga (*Centella asiatica*)

The Latin name for it directly translated means "the star of Asia"! It is used for so many things. Among them are for skin, brain health and micro-circulation.



Misai kucing (*Orthosiphon species*)

The pretty flower resembles a cat's whiskers, hence its name. It is used to treat renal stones and gout. It has been used also for diabetes and high blood pressure by the kampong Malay folks.



Tongkat Ali (*Eurycoma longifolia*)

This is probably the most well known of Malaysian herbs. It has been used for its aphrodisiac properties. However, new research has shown benefit in fever and malaria. The Orang Asli have long used it for this purpose.

Mainstream Herbs

The efficacy of some herbs has spoken for themselves, cutting across international borders. In this age of globalisation, heavy media exposure and savvy marketing, some herbs have become what is called 'mainstream', garnering attention from consumers in Asia, Europe and the US. Among the herbs or herbal supplements that have become 'mainstream' are ginseng, *lingzhi* and ginkgo.



International Stars

Lingzhi (*Ganoderma lucidum*)

This woody mushroom is the most popular Chinese herb after Ginseng. It is called the herb of longevity and is a powerful tonic. Legend has it that Emperor Shih Huang Ti dedicated his life looking for it and never found it!



Ginkgo (*Ginkgo biloba*)

Next to Ginseng, this is the most international herb. It is the most doctor prescribed herb in the world and has achieved mainstream credibility. 😊



Dr. Rajen M. (PhD)

Age: 40
Married with one daughter

Qualifications:
Bachelor of Pharmacy (Hons),
Masters in Business Administration,
Doctorate in Holistic Medicine

Industry Activities:
Director, Malaysian Herbal Corporation
(under MIGHT)

Favourite food:
Japanese food, especially *sashimi* and eel

Supplements: Organic fruits and vegetables in a capsule, milk calcium tablets, fish oil

Hobby: Reading on health and management

Exercise: Walks the stairs instead of taking the elevator. Meditates for half an hour every day.

Dr. Rajen M took a different path in life and it made all the difference. The trained pharmacist created waves in the Malaysian health scene not by extolling virtues of modern drugs, but by ardently advocating alternative medicine. He was a pioneer when he started writing on alternative medicine in 1995 in a local newspaper. Since then, he has appeared on radio and television talk shows, and is a much sought after speaker on holistic health in public talks.

Rajen's knowledge on herbs and holistic health has been tapped by the Malaysian Government. He is a director of the Malaysian Herbal Corporation, a Government body that will spearhead the development of the herbal industry under a National Blue Print for the Herbal Industry to be implemented in 2004-2005. Rajen is also a member of the Malaysia Ministry of Health's Standing Committee for Traditional Medicine.

How did a pharmacist end up in alternative medicine? Back in the 1980s, Rajen used to scoff at herbs and alternative medicine as wishy-washy 'bomoh stuff'. As a trained pharmacist, he only believed in the power of modern drugs. He worked as a pharmacist in the Kuala Lumpur General Hospital and later enjoyed a promising career in marketing with several notable pharmaceutical companies. However, his belief system took a 360° turn ten years later, when he found out that drugs are not the only solution to health problems.

The paradigm shift is related to a nodular rash that appeared on Rajen's back every three weeks. What was irritating was that the nodules would bleed, causing embarrassing blood stains on his shirt. The rash would stay for about a week, disappear and then appear again

later. Being a pharmacist, Rajen medicated himself with creams, ointments and scrubs. Then he resorted to anti-histamines, antibiotics, anti-fungals and even steroids. He consulted several prominent doctors on his skin problem. Over a period of two years, he tried many medical options but nothing worked effectively. At one point, the skin on his back even peeled!

Desperation and the urging of his mother drove him to visit a homeopath. He was prescribed with pills that looked like 'sugar balls' made from some herbs. After a second dose of 'pills', the rash completely disappeared. Rajen was shocked that alternative medicine can work and that he himself did not know about how and why it worked. So he delved into the world of alternative medicine by reading and asking those in the

know. Herbs, Ayurveda, Traditional Chinese Medicine, chiropractic and osteopathy became fascinating subjects to him.

Later, he left a lucrative career in the pharmaceutical industry to set up his own company, marketing herbs mostly from the ayurvedic heritage. "Ten years ago, a pharmacist going into herbs was unheard of," he notes. Over time, he researched Malaysian herbs and processed them into modern pharmaceutical dosage forms – creams, pills and capsules. He then signed up for a doctorate in Holistic Medicine.

His thesis was on eicosanoids, that is, biological modular research which looks at how molecules are affected by what we eat. His current areas of interest include detoxification and psychoneuroimmunology or mind-body medicine.

Rajen keeps himself in the forefront of developments in the herbal industry, especially research on tropical medicinal plants. He is one of the managing editors of *Journal of Tropical Medicinal Plants*, which publishes findings of eminent researchers. It contains scientific information on medicinal plants, utilisation, conservation, safety, efficacy and quality control.

In the academic field, Rajen contributed his knowledge as a course director in alternative medicine at the Pharmacy Department of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), and a guest lecturer on alternative medicine at the International Medical University (IMU). He is a member of the Malaysian Pharmaceutical Society (MPS).

Currently, Rajen is expanding his business horizons. He is a director of Total Health Concept Sdn Bhd and the managing director of Alterni (M) Sdn Bhd. Both companies market herbal-based products as well as natural health products such as fish oil, minerals and organic multivitamins.