Medieval medicine resurrected: Could a 1,000 year old potion help fight bacterial infections?

Garlic, onion, wine, and a dash of bovine bile. It's a veritable witch's brew, but as a new Scientific Reports paper shows, this medieval recipe, called "Bald's eyesalve," is effective at staving off several nasty strains of bacteria, including those that have evolved to resistant antibiotics.

Indeed, the new paper, led by Freya Harrison from the School of Life Sciences at the University of Warwick, highlights an under-appreciated way of sourcing antibacterial compounds. Many previously effective antibiotic drugs no longer work, as germs are evolving new defenses against them, so it's important to develop alternative strategies. Medieval texts, while a seemingly weird source for medical information, could help in this regard.

"Plants have been used as medicines against infection for millennia, and we've only scratched the surface in understanding their true potential," said Cassandra Quave, an ethnobotanist at Emory University who wasn't involved in the new research. "This study is exciting because it demonstrates how mixtures of specific plant ingredients, such as those found in Bald's eyesalve, can sometimes work better than individual components in fighting infection."

Indeed, as the new research shows, the potency of Bald's eyesalve couldn't be whittled down to a single ingredient. For it to work, all ingredients had to be present, highlighting the importance of studying combinations of compounds.

Read the original post