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Swiss-New Zealand life histories: Sandra Clair

If you ever doubt in the power of natural medicine or are in danger of forgetting that the term „alternative medicine“ is incorrectly assigned to herbal medicine and such modalities, attend a lecture by Sandra Clair.

For me it was the only chance to catch some time with this skilled and passionate herbalist from Dunedin. I went along to my old school to hear her talk about traditional herbal practices of Switzerland. Among students, graduates, interested people and tutors, I observe this modest gentle woman preparing for her presentation. Wearing the hat of the business woman, with a post-graduate diploma in Health Science from the University of New England, Australia in 2008, she greets us and soon puts on the well-worn pretty straw hat of the wild-crafting herbalist and takes us on a journey up the Swiss mountains (with help of powerpoint). Including the yodel, to make sure none of us gets lost along the treacherous path. It renders me proud to know from the heart what she's talking about and that this treasure to New Zealand's natural health professionals is from my homeland.

Sandra Clair was born in Langnau, Emmental, in 1967. Her father ran his own business as a heating engineer; her mother was an active volunteer for Heimstätte Bärau, an institution for mentally and physically handicapped people. Her older sister is trained as a nurse and helps her husband run his dermatology practice. Sandra completed a Master's Degree in history and medical anthropology (the study of humankind, past and present) at the University of Bern. She did part of this degree at the University of Salamanca in Spain, as her specialty was Spanish history.

During her study years commencing in 1991, she also undertook an apprenticeship with an accomplished traditional herbalist and midwife, Sister Pauline. With her guidance, Sandra gained invaluable knowledge on how to safely administer herbs to pregnant and breastfeeding mothers, and generally how to support families in self-care. Sandra accompanied Sister Pauline on her gathering expeditions in the mountains and helped process the collected herbs into remedies.

After completion of her Master's Degree, she took on a job with the insurer Swico in Zürich, where she headed an „Advisory Office for Complementary Medicine“, and also compiled the material for a TV programme aired by Swiss TV at the time about common ailments and their treatment with natural remedies.

An appointment to a new position in Winterthur would have meant leaving the residency in her beloved Bern as travel would have been too far and Sandra needed to ponder over this. She decided to have some time abroad and ventured to Otago, New Zealand, in 1995. She loved it and stayed in Dunedin, where she set up a practice for body therapy and phytotherapy (as herbal medicine is called in Europe).



Sandra Clair

When it came to prescribing herbs, Sandra found herself at a loss as to where to find these in New Zealand. She had no choice but to find them first and foremost in the wilderness of the mountains and make up the remedies for her clients herself. After a while, health shop owners started to approach her and ask if she could supply them with these effective Swiss herbal formulations, as people were asking to buy repeat remedies.

This was the beginning of Artemis, Sandra's business, in 1998. Her medicinal teas and liquid formulations distinguish themselves from most others on the market, as Sandra uses predominantly wild-crafted, certified organic and freshly processed herbs to make up her remedies.

She is of the opinion that Central Otago produces some of the most potent medicinal herbs. Herbs such as chickweed, stinging nettle and comfrey are grown in her own garden at her Otago peninsula home.

Last year, Artemis was named the winner of the Deloitte Award for the "Fastest Growing Manufacturer in Otago and the Lower South Island". Within the same month, Artemis was also announced the winner of the prestigious OBIZ Ethics Award, the only business to take out both awards in the same year, proving that it is possible to grow a business based on ethical and sustainable principles. Today, the company employs 11 people and Sandra has just appointed a CEO to free her up for wild-crafting, research and development to expand her natural medicine product line, and also the completion of a PhD in Health Sciences at the University of Canterbury, in collaboration with the Chair for Natural Medicine of the University of Zürich, Switzerland. This project aims to translate a number of medicinal plant profiles from a rare Renaissance botanical *Materia Medica* and compare the almost 500-year-old knowledge about these herbs with current clinical applications and scientific evidence.

Sandra also has a strong commitment to re-acquaint people with traditional herbal medicine. She aims to achieve this by teaching at Schools of conventional and alternative medicine and presentations at conferences. She also publishes writings on numerous topics here in New Zealand and overseas. She believes it only takes one generation to lose all of the knowledge, and with the current dominance of Biomedicine, some countries are in danger of doing just that. Yet 80% of the world's population still relies solely on plant medicine for their primary health care.

Sandra is supported in her work by her best friend and husband, Dieter, whom she married in 2000. Sandra is an inspiration for me and those who work in the field of natural medicine, and I hope her work will reach many corners of the world.

www.artemis.co.nz

By Trudi Fill-Weidmann