



Toward Translational Phytochemistry: Integrating Rigorous Chemical Analysis into Ethnobotanical Research

Alireza Pourrahim ^{1*} , Roman Lysiuk ² 

¹ Student Research Committee, Faculty of Medicine, Ilam University of Medical Sciences, Ilam, Iran.

² Department of Pharmacognosy and Botany, Danylo Halytsky Lviv National Medical University, Pekarska, 69., Lviv, Ukraine.

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***Corresponding Author:** alirpourrahim2003@gmail.com

Dear Editor

Ethnobotany is the interdisciplinary study of the relationships between human societies and plants, encompassing the documentation, cultural significance, and traditional uses of botanical resources (Abbasi et al., 2025). In medicinal plant research, ethnobotanical fieldwork provides a critical foundation by identifying species with therapeutic potential and recording the cultural practices that govern their preparation and use. The global renewed interest in natural products has highlighted the value of ethnobotanical knowledge in natural product research (Atanasov et al., 2021). Traditional medicine systems

worldwide document thousands of plant species with therapeutic applications, representing centuries of empirical observation and cultural transmission (Cragg & Newman, 2013). However, a critical gap persists: the vast majority of ethnobotanically documented plants remain inadequately characterized by modern chemical standards (Heinrich et al., 2020). This disconnection between traditional knowledge and rigorous scientific validation represents a significant bottleneck in translating promising ethnobotanical observations into evidence-based phytomedicines. We propose the term "Translational Phytochemistry" to describe a

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framework that offers a systematic approach to bridge this divide.

Translational Phytochemistry can be defined as the deliberate, systematic application of advanced analytical chemistry to validate, characterize, and standardize ethnobotanically documented medicinal plants. Analogous to translational medicine's "bench-to-bedside" paradigm, this approach represents a "field-to-formulation" continuum where ethnobotanical use serves as the primary hypothesis generator for chemical investigation. Unlike conventional phytochemistry, which often pursues compound isolation driven by chemical novelty or random screening, Translational Phytochemistry is explicitly anchored in documented traditional use. The framework integrates four essential components: rigorous ethnobotanical documentation and prioritization of candidates; comprehensive phytochemical profiling using modern analytical platforms; bioactivity-guided fractionation linked to traditional therapeutic claims; and development of standardization protocols for quality control. Importantly, these components should serve as an entry point to, rather than a substitute for, subsequent pharmacological, toxicological, pharmacokinetic, clinical, and regulatory evaluation. This integrated approach ensures that chemical analysis is purposefully directed toward validating and understanding plants with established ethnopharmacological relevance. Figure 1 illustrates this framework, depicting the field-to-formulation continuum as a cyclical process where ethnobotanical knowledge generates chemical hypotheses, rigorous analysis validates traditional use, and evidence-based products emerge with continuous bidirectional refinement supported by authentication, standardization, bioactivity testing, and ethical safeguards.

The necessity of rigorous chemical analysis in ethnobotanical research cannot be overstated. Traditional use, while valuable, presents inherent limitations when considered in isolation. Botanical misidentification remains a persistent problem in ethnobotanical surveys, particularly when vernacular names are used without herbarium voucher specimens or molecular authentication (Heinrich et al., 2020, Zhu et al., 2022). Even when species identity is confirmed, phytochemical

content exhibits substantial variability influenced by geographic origin, seasonal harvest timing, soil composition, post-harvest processing, and traditional preparation methods (Cragg & Newman, 2013, Gertsch, 2011). Without chemical characterization, it may be difficult to determine whether the chemical basis of reported therapeutic effects is reproducible across populations or preparations, or to establish meaningful relationships between chemical composition and biological activity. (Simmler et al., 2014). Furthermore, the reproducibility crisis in natural product research is partly rooted in inadequate chemical standardization. Studies claiming biological activity for crude extracts without defining their chemical composition cannot be meaningfully replicated or compared (Baker, 2016). Modern analytical techniques provide the necessary tools to address these challenges. High-performance liquid chromatography coupled with diode array or UV detection enables quantification of marker compounds for quality control. Liquid chromatography-mass spectrometry offers comprehensive metabolite profiling and chemical fingerprinting. Nuclear magnetic resonance spectroscopy provides powerful structural elucidation of isolated compounds (Simmler et al., 2014). When combined with DNA barcoding for species authentication, these methods create a robust foundation for chemical validation of ethnobotanical knowledge (Zhu et al., 2022).

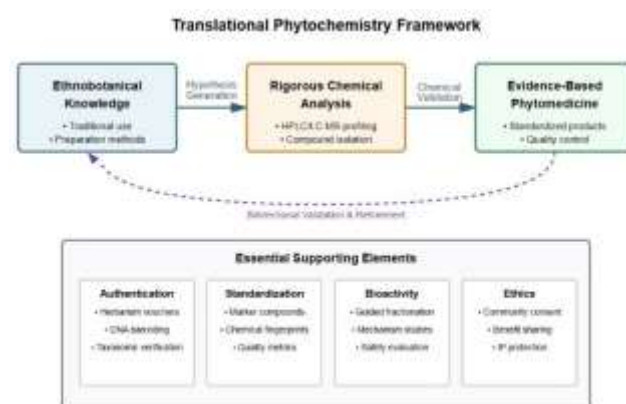


Figure 1. Translational Phytochemistry framework illustrating the field-to-formulation continuum.

The relationship between ethnobotany and chemistry should be understood as synergistic and bidirectional. Ethnobotanical knowledge serves as

an invaluable prioritization tool in natural product discovery, helping to reduce the vast chemical search space by directing attention toward plants with pre-validated biological hypotheses based on human use spanning generations or centuries (Cragg & Newman, 2013, Zhu et al., 2022). Traditional preparation methods; whether decoction, fermentation, or combination with specific adjuvants may influence the chemical composition, bioavailability, stability, or toxicity of the resulting preparations (Gertsch, 2011, Verpoorte et al., 2005). Chemical analysis can reveal the scientific basis for these practices, sometimes validating traditional methods and other times suggesting refinements based on modern understanding of pharmacokinetics and stability. Successful examples of this approach demonstrate how ethnobotanical leads, when subjected to rigorous phytochemical investigation, yield characterized bioactive compounds with defined mechanisms of action (Cragg & Newman, 2013). Equally important are cases where chemical analysis has refined or corrected traditional knowledge, identifying toxic constituents requiring removal or revealing that therapeutic effects attributed to one compound actually arise from synergistic interactions among multiple phytochemicals (Gertsch, 2011). This bidirectional validation strengthens both disciplines: chemistry validates ethnobotany through mechanistic understanding, while ethnobotany directs chemistry toward biologically relevant targets (Verpoorte et al., 2005).

Despite its promise, Translational Phytochemistry faces significant challenges that must be acknowledged and addressed. Methodological inconsistency across ethnobotanical studies hampers systematic chemical follow-up, with variations in documentation standards, plant part selection, and extraction protocols making cross-study comparisons difficult (Baker, 2016, Heinrich et al., 2020). Many biodiversity-rich regions where traditional medicine knowledge is concentrated lack access to advanced analytical instrumentation, creating a geographic disconnect between ethnobotanical data collection and chemical characterization capacity. Publication bias toward positive phytochemical findings may obscure important negative results, such as cases where traditional use cannot be chemically or

pharmacologically validated (Heinrich et al., 2020). Intellectual property concerns and legitimate fears of biopiracy create tension when traditional knowledge interfaces with commercial chemical research, requiring careful attention to benefit-sharing agreements and community consent. Finally, the field lacks standardized reporting guidelines equivalent to CONSORT or PRISMA for clinical and systematic review research, making it difficult to assess study quality and compare findings across publications (Heinrich et al., 2020). Moving forward, we call for deliberate integration of Translational Phytochemistry principles into ethnobotanical research design and publication standards. Journals, including this one, can encourage interdisciplinary author teams combining ethnobotanical, analytical chemistry, and pharmacological expertise (Atanasov et al., 2021, Heinrich et al., 2020). Funding agencies should prioritize proposals that explicitly link ethnobotanical documentation with chemical validation (Atanasov et al., 2021). Research institutions in biodiversity-rich regions require capacity building in analytical chemistry infrastructure and training. The development of minimum reporting standards for combined ethnobotany-phytochemistry studies would enhance reproducibility and enable meaningful meta-analyses (Heinrich et al., 2020, Simmler et al., 2014). Open-access chemical databases specifically curated for traditional medicine compounds would accelerate knowledge sharing and prevent redundant isolation efforts (Atanasov et al., 2021)).

We propose the term translational Phytochemistry represents not merely a methodological refinement but a potentially valuable framework for advancing medicinal plant research. By systematically integrating rigorous chemical analysis into ethnobotanical investigation, researchers can strengthen the transition from ethnobotanical observations toward chemically characterized, reproducible, and scientifically testable phytomedicinal candidates, while respecting traditional knowledge and the standards of modern science.

Declarations Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Consent for Publications

The authors certify that that this work in its final form has been thoroughly reviewed and approved for publication.

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Authors' Contributions

Conceptualization: Alireza Pourrahim, Roman Lysiuk

Data curation: Alireza Pourrahim, Roman Lysiuk

Formal analysis: Alireza Pourrahim

Funding acquisition: Alireza Pourrahim

Methodology: Alireza Pourrahim

Project administration: Alireza Pourrahim

Resources: Alireza Pourrahim

Software: Alireza Pourrahim

Supervision: Alireza Pourrahim

Validation: Alireza Pourrahim

Visualization: Alireza Pourrahim

Writing – original draft: Alireza Pourrahim,
Roman Lysiuk

Writing – review & editing: Alireza Pourrahim

Ethical Considerations

Not applicable. This letter does not report new studies involving human participants, animal subjects, or patient data.

AI Use Disclosure

The authors confirm that QuillBot AI and Grammarly were used strictly for language editing, grammar correction, and paraphrasing assistance during the preparation of this manuscript.

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