CINCHONA TREE BARK

Scientific name

Cinchona officinalis

Common names

Holy bark, Peruvian bark

Where found

South America

Therapeutic ingredient

Quinine

Used to treat

Malaria

[The bark of the Cinchona tree] has turned out to be more precious for humanity than all the gold and silver that the Spaniards have removed from Peru.

17th century doctor Sebastiano Bado

In the 17th century a Spanish priest in Peru – Agostino Salumbrino (1561–1642) – an apothecary (pharmacist) by training, had observed the native Peruvians using the bark of the cinchona tree to reduce symptoms of malaria, a recurring fever caused by a blood parasite.

Salumbrino sent a small quantity to Rome for testing, as, at that time, malaria was common in the swamps and marshes surrounding Rome and was responsible for the death of countless Roman citizens. In the years that followed, cinchona bark became one of the most valuable commodities shipped from Peru to Europe.

The active ingredient of the bark, quinine, was isolated and named in 1820 by two French scientists, Pierre Joseph Pelletier and Joseph Bienaimé Caventou. The name they gave to it was derived from the name the native Peruvians used for the bark, quina or quina-quina, which roughly means ‘bark of bark’ or ‘holy bark’.

Large-scale use of quinine as a preventative treatment started around 1850. It remained the anti-malarial drug of choice until the 1940s, when other drugs replaced it. Since then, many effective treatments for malaria have been introduced, although quinine is still used to treat the disease in certain critical situations; even though quinine can be produced synthetically, Cinchona trees remain the only economically practical source of the drug.