HERBAL PRACTICE · SOUTH AFRICA

Diagnosing & Prescribing by Body System

A working framework for herbalists and phytotherapists practising in South Africa



Why organise by body system?



A repeatable process

Working system by system keeps case-taking, exam and formulation consistent for every patient.



Matches herbal actions

Herbs are traditionally classed by the actions they have on a system — e.g. carminative, expectorant, nervine.



Flags red flags fast

Reviewing each system in turn makes it harder to miss a symptom that needs medical referral.

THE REGULATORY PICTURE

Practising legally as a herbalist in SA

Allied Health Professions Act 63 of 1982

Establishes the AHPCSA and regulates allied and complementary health professions, phytotherapy included.

Registration category: Phytotherapy

Practising and using the title "phytotherapist" / registered herbalist requires AHPCSA registration in this category.

Diagnose, compound, dispense, prescribe

Registered phytotherapists may diagnose and formulate herbal treatment within their approved scope of practice.

A small, defined profession

Only a few dozen phytotherapists are registered nationally, so referral networks and CPD matter.

The diagnostic process, step by step

1



Case history

Presenting complaint, history, medication and lifestyle, taken system by system.

2



Physical signs

Observation, palpation and simple in-practice checks appropriate to scope of practice.

3



Pattern & system

Match findings to the body system(s) involved and the herbal actions needed.

4



Formulate

Select herbs, form (tincture, tea, capsule) and dose; check interactions.

5



Review

Reassess response, adjust the formula, and refer onward if red flags appear.

Digestive system

What we look for

- Appetite, bloating, reflux, bowel habit
- Pain pattern: before/after meals, location
- Stress and diet as triggers

When to refer

Nausea, unexplained weight change or blood in stool.

Herbs commonly indicated

- Bitters (wormwood, gentian) to stimulate digestion
- Chamomile & peppermint for spasm and gas
- Slippery elm & marshmallow root for irritated mucosa
- African wormwood (Artemisia afra) traditionally for digestive upset

Refer persistent weight loss, bleeding or severe pain for medical work-up.

Respiratory system

What we look for

- Cough type: dry, productive, nocturnal
- Breathlessness, wheeze, chest tightness
- Recent infection, allergy or smoking history

When to refer

Breathlessness at rest, chest pain or blue-tinged lips.

Herbs commonly indicated

- Thyme & horehound as expectorants for productive cough
- Marshmallow root & licorice to soothe dry cough
- African wormwood & buchu, traditional SA respiratory herbs
- Echinacea to support immune response in acute infection

Refer breathlessness at rest, chest pain, or fever that does not settle.

Cardiovascular system

What we look for

- Blood pressure trend, palpitations
- Circulation: cold extremities, varicosities
- Current cardiac medication history

When to refer

Chest pain, marked leg swelling or irregular heartbeat.

Herbs commonly indicated

- Hawthorn for general cardiovascular tone
- Garlic & ginkgo to support circulation
- Linden flower for mild hypertension support
- Hibiscus tea, evidence for modest blood-pressure support

Cardiac herbs commonly interact with prescribed medicines — always check before combining.

Nervous system

What we look for

- Sleep quality, anxiety, low mood
- Stress load, energy through the day
- Headache pattern and triggers

When to refer

Sudden severe headache, confusion or fainting.

Herbs commonly indicated

- Chamomile & lemon balm for mild anxiety and sleep
- Valerian for sleep support (short-term use)
- Skullcap and oat straw as nervine tonics
- St John’s wort — but note major drug interactions

St John’s wort interacts with many prescription medicines, including contraceptives and antidepressants.

Immune & lymphatic system

What we look for

- Frequency and severity of infections
- Lymph node swelling, fatigue pattern
- Autoimmune history

When to refer

Recurrent fever or unexplained weight loss.

Herbs commonly indicated

- Echinacea for acute infection support
- Astragalus as a longer-term immune tonic
- Elderberry for viral upper respiratory support
- Cat’s claw and other adaptogens for chronic stress load

Avoid stimulating immune herbs like echinacea in autoimmune conditions without care.

Musculoskeletal system

What we look for

- Pain location, type and triggers
- Swelling, redness, joint stiffness pattern
- Injury history and mobility

When to refer

Sudden severe joint swelling with fever.

Herbs commonly indicated

- Devil’s claw (Harpagophytum) — well-studied Southern African anti-inflammatory
- Turmeric/curcumin for inflammation support
- Willow bark for pain relief
- Arnica topically for bruising and muscular pain

Devil’s claw and willow bark caution with anticoagulants and peptic ulcer disease.

Urinary & reproductive systems

What we look for

- Urinary frequency, urgency, burning
- Menstrual pattern, cycle-related symptoms
- Menopausal symptoms

When to refer

Fever with flank pain, or unusually heavy bleeding.

Herbs commonly indicated

- Buchu & bearberry (uva ursi) for urinary tract support
- Cranberry for UTI prevention
- Chaste tree (Vitex) for cycle-related symptoms
- Black cohosh for menopausal symptom support

Vitex and hormonal herbs are contra-indicated in pregnancy and with hormonal medication.

Skin

What we look for

- Distribution, appearance and duration of lesions
- Itch, dryness, weeping or infection signs
- Known triggers: diet, allergens, stress

When to refer

Signs of infection or a rapidly changing lesion.

Herbs commonly indicated

- Calendula for wound healing and irritation
- Chamomile & oat for eczema-prone skin
- Aloe ferox — widely available Southern African species — for burns and dry skin
- Kigelia africana extracts, traditionally used topically

Any rapidly changing or non-healing lesion needs medical assessment, not herbal treatment alone.

Cross-cutting safety, whatever the system

Screen every medication

Ask about prescription, OTC and traditional remedies at every visit — interactions are the top risk.

Pregnancy & breastfeeding

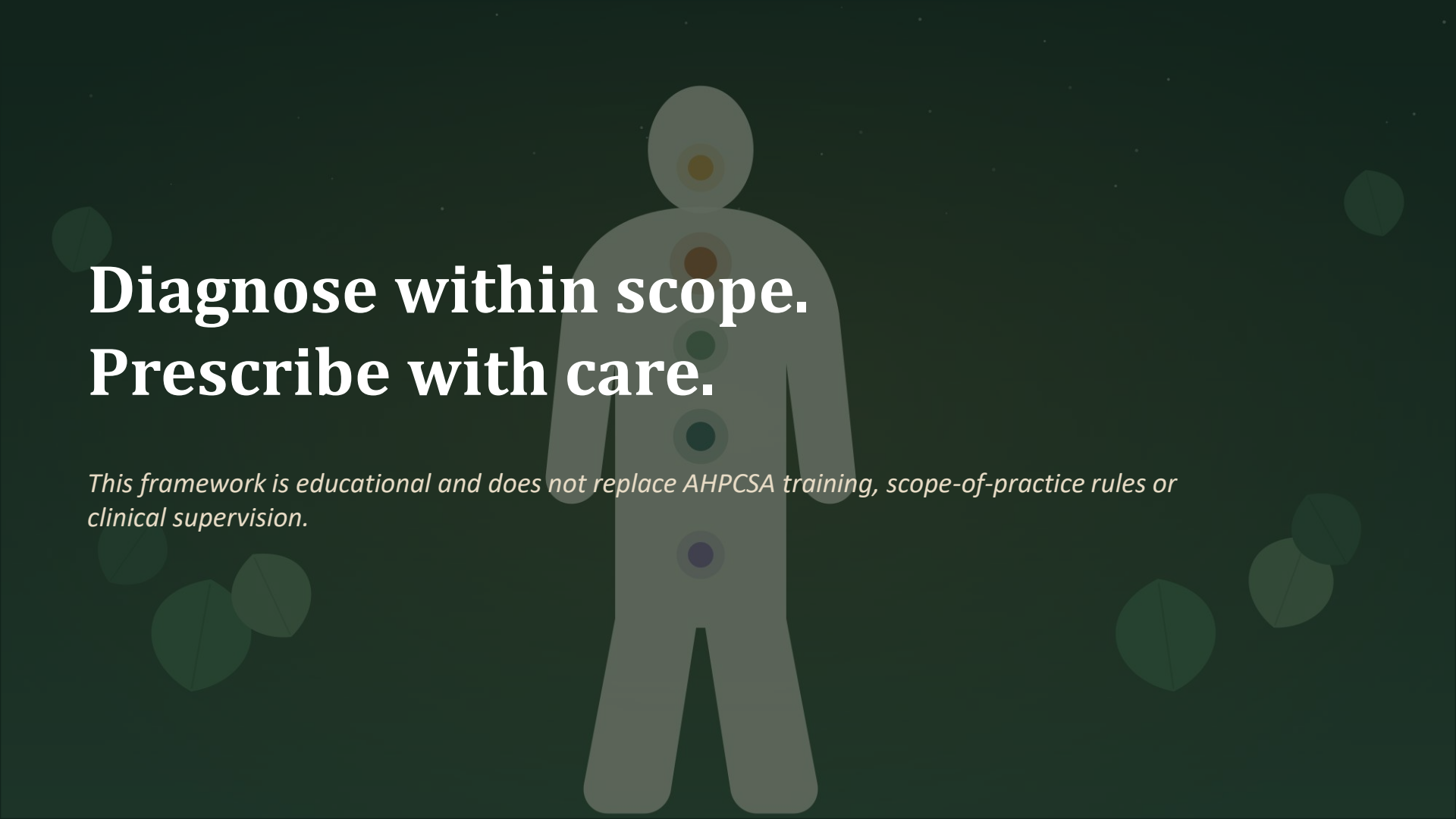
Many herbs (Vitex, St John’s wort, high-dose herbs generally) are unsuitable — check case by case.

Document the plan

Record history, formula, dose and rationale — good records support safe, defensible practice.

Know when to refer

Persistent, worsening or red-flag symptoms belong with a medical practitioner, in parallel or instead.



Diagnose within scope. Prescribe with care.

This framework is educational and does not replace AHPCSA training, scope-of-practice rules or clinical supervision.