



THE HEALING POWERS OF PINE BARK

SO FAMOUS were the curative powers of the pine-laden atmosphere of the French Atlantic coastline near Biarritz that every year the ageing, bronchitic King Edward VII, together with his friend Mrs Keppel, would migrate from the damp of England to holiday among the pine forests.

Doctors, biochemists and biologists attending a recent international conference on Andros on oxidative stress in skin biology and medicine, arranged by the University of Athens, learnt that although the air around the pine forests may have been pleasant to breathe, any health advantages of the maritime pines — *Pinus pinaster* — may actually lie in their bark.

Pine kernels have been available for a long time in health food shops. But while the extract of *Pinus pinaster*, marketed as Pycnogenol capsules, doesn't provide the same visual appeal as the small, shiny pine kernels, its health-giving properties may be greater. Pine bark has been used in traditional medicine for generations, as a treatment for scurvy and even in times of famine. The medical value of the culinary uses of pine are quite uncharted, but the biochemists who discussed the antioxidant properties of pine bark extract at the conference have found that it is rich in antioxidants and polyphenols. One of the lecturers talking about the advantages of Pycnogenol suggested that its potential uses were so varied that it could be compared to the Swiss army knife — something for every eventuality ranging from sunburn and hypertension to swelling from varicose veins.

Animal research on oedema and capillary strength suggested that it might be expected to be

Research after the Second World War showed that although food supplies to the Greek islands were more restricted than in almost any other occupied country, the lifespan of the islanders was still the longest in Europe. It was this work which started the international interest in the benefits of the Mediterranean diet.

Recently research workers at the University of Athens demonstrated that three decent-sized portions of fruit and vegetables a day provided an adequate supply of the necessary vitamins, minerals and antioxidants needed for optimum health. Although the maritime pine bark extract comes from the other end of the Mediterranean, and would never have been served at dinner, all the present work suggests that its benefits are similar to those that characterise Mediterranean diets.

useful in the treatment of such conditions as heavy legs, the problem of swollen feet and ankles which tries many people — not all of them older — who have either been sitting or standing for too long. It seems also to reduce capillary leak.

Pycnogenol has also been given in small trials to patients with retinal oedema with apparent advantage, and it is hoped that it will prove a valuable addition to the standard advice given to those who are likely to suffer macular degeneration to take daily multivitamins. Research is continuing into its effect on platelet aggregation — trials suggest that it could possibly be a substitute for aspirin during long flights for those in whom aspirin is contra-indicated because of fear of gastrointestinal haemorrhage.