Three years ago I was asked to teach a new course titled Medical Biology. The purpose of the course is to teach anatomy, physiology, medical theory and terminology for undergraduate, nonmajor business students entering the healthcare field. Because of the terminology introduced in the course, I was faced with a problem: Many biology majors who had completed a full year of anatomy and physiology were enrolled. One of the many tasks, then, was to develop a laboratory experience that would challenge an enrollment with a variety of skills, while neither boring, nor overwhelming the students. My solution was to use the laboratory to introduce the concept of responsibility for one’s own health. I used the physical exam to cover anatomy and physiology, and I brought in professionals who introduced different methods of treatment and theories of medicine. From this perspective, the laboratory design fell into place for me. Since I wanted to cover as many medical modalities as possible, one of the laboratories had to cover the oldest form of medicine, herbalism.

The Prairie Pharmacy, as I call this laboratory, stirs interest in all of the students with its direct application to their own personal health. This exercise also gives me the opportunity to introduce many different perspectives in the approach to medicine, including history, economics, botany, environmentalism, and chemistry. This helped in uniting a classroom of very different abilities and backgrounds. In addition, students enjoy the opportunity to go outside and identify medicinal plants.

Herbalism – the knowledge and study of herbs – may not be a term in the active vocabulary of my students, but it is a reality in life. Mustard on the kitchen table and many of the spices on the kitchen shelf come from herbs; most of the vegetables in a salad are herbs.

Susan A. Moore, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of Biology at The Franciscan University, Clinton, IA 52732, e-mail: susmoo@tfu.edu.