



**By Barbara Bronson Gray**

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TUESDAY, Jan. 8 (HealthDay News) -- Archeologists investigating an ancient shipwreck off the coast of Tuscany report they have stumbled upon a rare find: a tightly closed tin container with well-preserved medicine dating back to about 140-130 B.C.

A multi-disciplinary team analyzed fragments of the green-gray tablets to decipher their chemical, mineralogical and botanical composition. The results offer a peek into the complexity and sophistication of ancient therapeutics.

The research highlights the continuity from then until now in the use of some substances for the treatment of human diseases and also shows the care that was taken in choosing complex mixtures of products, olive oil, pine resin, starch in order to get the desired therapeutic effect and to help in the preparation and application of medicine.

The medicines and other materials were found together in a tight space and are thought to have been originally packed in a chest that seems to have belonged to a physician.

The tablets contained iron oxide, as well as starch, beeswax, pine resin and a mixture of plant-and-animal-derived lipids, or fats. The research team discovered that the tablets also contained carrot, radish, parsley, celery, wild onion and cabbage, simple plants that would be found in a garden.

Giachi said that the composition and shape of the tablets suggest they may have been used to treat the eyes, perhaps as an eyewash and also to treat wounds.

The shipwrecked boat -- the *Relitto del Pozzino* -- was found in the Gulf of Baratti in 1974 and first explored eight years later. In addition to the pills, archeologists found other remnants of early medicine: a copper bleeding cup, a tin pitcher, 136 boxwood vials, and tin containers.

The tablets were well preserved for the last 2,000 years because the cylindrical tin container in which they were stored, was hermetically sealed by the natural degradation

**Dr. Mark Fromer**, an ophthalmologist at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City, said it makes sense that the medicine that was discovered on the ship was an eye wash to treat dry eye, a common condition even today. "It's easy to make saline, which has a pH [acid balance] close to tears," he explained. "It's fascinating to realize that the problems that faced men and women thousands of years ago haven't changed."