

Short reports

Ipecacuanha asthma: an old lesson

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In 1984 Luczynska and her colleagues¹ described occupational asthma in workers packing ipecacuanha tablets, and stated that this association had not previously been described. As ipecacuanha has been used as a remedy in Britain since about 1680, having been used as a traditional cure in Brazil long before that,² this suggested a singular failure of the powers of observation of doctors over several centuries. In fact, the association had been described previously.

Watson's lectures on physic, 1848

In his 49th lecture at King's College, London, Thomas Watson³ considered the condition he called hay-asthma. He went on to describe another vegetable substance, the powder of ipecacuanha, which had similar effects, in the following words:

I recollect a servant employed in the laboratory of St Bartholomew's Hospital, when I was a pupil there, who had the peculiar ill-luck to be liable to this affection. Whenever that drug was under preparation, he was obliged to fly the place. This idiosyncrasy is not very uncommon. A very small quantity of ipecacuan dust is sufficient, in such persons, to bring on a paroxysm of extreme dyspnoea, wheezing and cough, with singular anxiety, and great weakness. The distress usually terminates by a copious expectoration of mucus.

These effects of a powdered root, and of certain emanations from grass or hay, lend weight to the hypothesis which ascribes the influenza to subtle vegetable matter floating in the atmosphere.

I would suggest a trial of the Respirator, as a defence against the particles of ipecacuan, and against the volatile exciting cause (whatever it may be) of hay-asthma"

Discussion

Ipecacuanha has been in British pharmacopoeas since its introduction at the end of

the seventeenth century. Its use as an emetic was greatest at a time when physicians chose purgation, emesis, and blood letting as the preferred mode of extracting fees from their patients, but its main fame rested on its combination with opium in Dover's powders. Thomas Dover introduced the remedy in the early eighteenth century after his retirement from the sea (in his career as a privateer he had rescued Alexander Selkirk—or Robinson Crusoe—from his island). The drug combination was thought to be synergistic in the management of diarrhoea and also had the advantage of inducing vomiting if too large a dose of the opiate was taken.

As ipecacuanha seems to have been one of the most widely used drugs in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many workers engaged in its preparation must have suffered from rhinitis and asthma. It is a comfort that medical students in the early 19th century at least will have been made aware of this in their lectures and textbooks. The risk was also mentioned in pharmacological textbooks of the era—for example⁴:

A singular effect in some peculiar constitutions is, that the dust of the powder, or even its odour, produces a paroxysm not unlike that of spasmodic asthma, attended with excessive anxiety and sometimes a tendency to convulsions.

Ipecacuanha sensitivity causing asthma is now prescribed as an occupational disease in Britain. Why was it forgotten between the 1850s and the 1980s? One reason is the declining use of the drug but another is probably a decline in interest among doctors about the primary causes of diseases as opposed to the mechanisms. Recent awakening of interest in environmental causes of ill health should ensure that fewer such conditions are missed in the future.

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- 1 Luczynska CM, Marshall PE, Scarisbrick DA, Topping MD. Occupational allergy due to inhalation of ipecacuanha dust. *Clin Allergy* 1984;14:169-75.
- 2 Christison R. *A dispensatory, or commentary on the pharmacopoeas of Great Britain*. Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1848:559.
- 3 Watson T. *Lectures on the principles and practice of physic*. Vol 2. 3rd ed. London: Parker, 1848:52.
- 4 Christison R. *A dispensatory, or commentary on the pharmacopoeas of Great Britain*. Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1848:565.