

THE DISEASES OF CHINA

INCLUDING FORMOSA AND KOREA

(JEFFERYS and MAXWELL)

SECOND EDITION

BY

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Poisons of Vegetable Origin.

Varnish Poisoning.—This has already been dealt with earlier in this chapter. While of most importance as a cause of industrial poisoning, it also constitutes the commonest cause of accidental poisoning of vegetable origin with the exception of opium poisoning, which will be dealt with later.

Arisæma Poisoning.—Poisoning with different kinds of arisæma would seem to be far from rare in China, but as few such cases are reported it is difficult to give any definite information on this point. Three species of the plant would appear to be common. *Arisaema japonicum*, *A. ringeris*, and *A. thunbergii*. The root would appear to be the common source of poisoning, and it is used by the Chinese in medicine. As such it is given for apoplexy, hemiplegia, epilepsy and many other diseases supposed to depend on the presence of "phlegm." It is pounded and mixed with vinegar or oil and applied to small tumors or swellings. Having a somewhat benumbing influence, similar to that of aconite, it is sometimes used as an ingredient in certain local anæsthetic compounds, which are applied to painful growths or to abscesses previous to being opened.

It would seem, however, that where accidental poisoning occurs it is usually the fresh root which is eaten in error. Vogt (*C. M. J.*, XXXI, 392) describes such a case occurring in his practice.

A woman of 50 years of age was taken immediately ill after eating a piece of the root about the size of the end of the finger. She was seized with a strangling pain in the mouth and throat, and trismus was found to be present. The patient was relieved by washing out the stomach but later suffered from weakness of the limbs and paralytic distention of the bowels. The patient recovered, but untreated cases are said usually to die in a few hours.

The suitable treatment would seem to be: washing out the stomach or emetics, purgatives, strong coffee, and hot applications to the abdomen to relieve pain.

Atriplicism.—In North China, where famines are frequent and severe, there are undoubtedly many cases of disease caused by the eating of weeds and herbs that give rise to symptoms of poisoning. Probably the most important of these is *Atriplex serrata*. An interesting account of five cases of such poisoning is given by Martin (*C. M. J.*, XXXIX, 808), whose report of the cases with an interesting note attached we herewith append.

The following cases of atriplicism may be of interest to hospitals in North China.

Because of the failure of the crops recently in this part of Manchuria, many poor people as a last resort have been eating various herbs, among them *Atriplex serrata* (*Chenopodiaceae*) which is often found growing near the edge of fields and road-sides.



Fig. 95.—Atriplicism. (By S. H. Martin.)

We have had five cases which suffered severely from poisoning by this herb. A typical case was that of a young woman, aged eighteen years, who came to us on June 4th, 1925, after having gathered and boiled seven handfuls of the herb (known as "noong jang-ai" in this district), which she had eaten in her home at noon of that day. At 3 p.m. she felt pains in her finger tips, then in her face. About five hours after being admitted to hospital she could not see because of oedema of eyelids and face, and the hands and arms were tremendously swollen. After two days large blebs containing clear fluid formed on the face and hands and superficial gangrene set in from fingers to axilla. Cyanosis was marked in the face. The bullæ increased and the itching was intolerable. We treated all the cases by covering the face, arms, and hands with a saturated solution of magnesium sulphate in glycerin, and gave large doses of salts and salol internally. All recovered in two weeks except the case described. This patient developed sloughs on both hands. She was discharged cured in three weeks.

Before pus infection and the superficial gangrene occurred, the patient's blood count, temperature, stool and urine examinations were negative. The ingestion of the herb has apparently no effect on the alimentary system. All the patients were women; the Chinese say that men are rarely affected.

Note.—In connection with the above cases the following note, taken from the *Manual of Tropical Medicine* by Castellani and Chalmers (3rd edition), may be of historical interest.

Atriplicism was first described in 1898 by Matignon. His cases were in Peking. So far as is known the disease is confined to China. In Peking Atriplex grows as a weed in the courts, gardens and along the walls of the houses, and is eaten by very poor people either uncooked or as a pancake. It is said never to be poisonous if well washed, and if the red leaves are picked out. But Matignon drew attention to the fact that a small insect of a greenish-yellow colour is found on the plant. It is possible that the disease may be due to this insect, because Mégnin found that *Holothyrus coccinella Gervais*, a mite found in Mauritius and the Malay Archipelago, causes severe inflammation of the part touched. This insect may be carried by the hand to the mouth. Laveran thinks that the people get the thumb and fore-finger infected while plucking the herb and that it is by the hand that the disease is carried to the mouth. The etiology is, therefore, extremely doubtful, and it may be either an animal or a vegetal poisoning. Women suffer more than men, and the young and old are especially attacked. Atriplicism may require to be diagnosed from Raynaud's disease and erythromelalgia, but there should be no difficulty, because in the former there is no œdema, and in the latter there is redness as well as œdema.

Datura Poisoning.—*Datura alba* and *Datura stramonium* are, one or other, common wild plants over a great part of China. The ordinary people are well aware of their powerfully poisonous nature and we have never heard of a case of poisoning in an adult. The size and shape of the fruit, however, makes it very attractive to young children, whom we have frequently seen playing with it, and cases of poisoning occur in infants who have been carelessly allowed to get hold of the fruit and bite it. As the flavour is unpleasant it is probably seldom that fatal results arise, but cases of some severity are met with.

In one such under our own care an infant had been allowed to play with one of the fruits and had bitten a piece out of it. When seen the child was flushed and feverish and had had a convulsion. The most striking point, however, was the extremely wide dilatation of the pupils. Vomiting had taken place and probably the bulk of the poisonous material had thus been removed. The child completely recovered in about 48 hours.

Treatment should be by emetics and purgatives to get rid of any portion of the fruit swallowed. Bromides and nerve sedatives are indicated in cases of excitement and delirium.

Illicium Poisoning.—The seeds of *Illicium religiosum* are used in flavouring food in place of the innocuous seeds of *Illicium anisatum*. Cases of poisoning from such use are not very rarely seen in North China. The symptoms are said to be a feeling of weariness, weakness of the upper extremities, nausea and convulsions, especially in children. At one time, when opium was more difficult to obtain, these poisonous seeds were used frequently in Central China for suicidal purposes.