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Chinese Herbal/Patent Medicine: Concerns and Approaches

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Abstract

Chinese Herbal/Patent Medicine (CHM/CPM) has long been an integral part of Asian culture and practices. The recent increase in Asian immigrants to North America has brought about a rise in the sale and consumption of Chinese medicinals among Asians as well as non-Asians. Although CHM/CPM may not pose a problem when used appropriately, it has been found that misuse, mislabeled and inappropriate preparations may lead to serious health consequences. A literature search reviews the potential hazards and reported cases of toxicity related to the use of various CHM/CPM. A discussion includes ingredients with potential hazards, unapproved combinations with Western medicines, and errors in dispensing. These reported problems associated with the use of CHM/CPM have generated concern world-wide, however, these multi-faceted problems are further complicated by a multicultural society in North America. A lack of communication between health care professionals and users may be a hindrance for awareness and reporting of potential health hazards. As health professionals, we should take an active role in research, education and regulations to foster safety and efficacy of CHM/CPM for all users.

Introduction

Chinese Herbal/Patent Medicine (CHM/CPM) have been a vital part of the Chinese culture and practices since ancient times. Despite the advances in Western medicine, the use of medicinal herbs in both raw and proprietary forms remains popular among Asian communities world-wide. One of the reasons for their continued popularity is the belief that these medicinals are harmless and without side-effects due to their "natural" origin. Although the use of CHM/CPM rarely poses any significant problem, related cases of severe and even fatal poisonings have been reported in the literature. These documented poisonings have raised the awareness and concerns of health care professionals and the scientific community at large. In North America, concerns are compounded by cultural and language barriers.

Attitudes about Chinese Medicine

- My ancestors have used it, therefore it must be effective.
- It worked on my friend's conditions, it should work on mine.
- Why pay doctors when I can buy it over-the-counter?
- Its natural, therefore harmless and without side-effects.
- Nothing else works, therefore it is worth a try.
- Even if it doesn't cure, it'll be nourishing.

- Pharmacology? As long as it works.

Discussion

Although the formulation and application of most traditional CHM/CPM have been passed down through generations, in recent years many products were found to be reformulated, relabeled and new indications were added to some, unannounced. There is an increase in the number of reported cases in the literature documenting toxicities related to some commonly used CHM/CPM products available on the market. These cases have brought international attention and concern because the affected population included Asians as well as non-Asians. Although only a few cases have been reported in North America, it is important to heighten the awareness of health practitioners to recognize some of the potential hazards.

1. Errors in Dispensing

Although the use of a single or a combination of raw herbs is commonly prescribed by practitioners, there have been cases of error in dispensing that led to serious health consequences and even death. While the occurrence of herbal poisoning may be common, only a few cases have been documented. This is probably due to the vast array of herb combinations used, and the reluctance of herbalists to disclose the contents of their prescriptions. Therefore it is crucial that one should not attempt to self-medicate with unfamiliar herbs.

Note: Hong Kong and Australia have reported cases of serious and even fatal reactions due to Aconite Poisoning.

2. Unintended adulteration of CPM

Even though most CPM includes a list of ingredients in its insert (mostly in Chinese), some do not reflect the actual contents or the side effects. It is often difficult to detect adulterated products unless routine sampling are done or ill effects have been associated.

Note: Recent literature reported cases of serious poisoning due to falsely-labeled brand of Jin Bu Huan, a commonly used analgesic and sedative. Instead of the labeled content of 30% Polygla Chinensis alkaloid, it actually contained 36% of levo-tetrahydropalmatine (L-THP), causing life-threatening symptom in three children.

3. Intended Adulteration of CPM

Disease interactions. A majority of these ingredients were detected only after the users experienced some adverse effects from it. Some commonly found additives are codeine, diazepam, non-steroid anti-inflammatory agents, salicylates, acetaminophen, corti-costeroids, diuretics, antibiotics and theophylline.

Note: Cases of toxicity related to Cow's Head Tung Shueh Pills, a CPM which contained various western medicines including diazepam and steroids, were

reported in the United States. Subsequently, the health officials of several states distributed recalls and warnings about this and similar products which are not FDA approved but widely marketed and sold.

4. Heavy Metals in CPM

Heavy metals are also present in various traditional CPM, some for intended use while others are contaminants. Cinnabar and calomel are common mercurials used in CPM for their sedative and anti-infective properties. When used appropriately, these mercurials rarely pose any significant problem; however, their misuse, abuse, overdosage and mishandling can lead to serious health consequences. Lead and arsenic have been detected in some products.

Note: A lawsuit in New York City netted two million dollars for a child who suffered from permanent neurological symptoms related to the use of the product Tse Koo Choy, which contains calomel (mercurous chloride). A Chinese store and two hospitals were cited in the case for the sale of the product and the failure to diagnose the symptoms of toxicity.

Conclusion

Our concerns

Despite the advances and efficacies of Western medicine, the use of CHM/CPM remains popular among Asian communities worldwide. Although the problems we have encountered concerning the use of CHM/CPM are global, they are compounded by our multi-cultural society in North America.

- Increasing Asian population.
- Increasing foreign sources.
- Ready accessibility.
- Labels mainly in Chinese.
- Unregulated by FDA.
- Limited information.

Our Goals

The anticipated increase in popularity of Chinese medicines in the coming years will require the same vigilance as that directed toward should not discredit the use of Chinese medicines, as health care professionals we should take an active role in improving the safety and efficacy of these products for all users. Some proposals have been made to promote awareness and safety in North America. With joint efforts, hopefully Chinese medicines will become a safe and effective alternative for all users.

- Regulation
- Education
- Research

"Who of us is mature enough for offspring before offspring arrives? The value of marriage is not that adults produce children but that children produce adults." -- Peter de Vries