

SERIOUS CUTANEOUS ADVERSE REACTIONS TO TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINES

Dear Sir,

We read with interest the article by Drs Lim and Thirumoorthy⁽¹⁾. We would like to commend the authors for highlighting through these case reports, important issues on the adverse reactions to traditional Chinese medicines. Not only in the developing world where up to 80% of the population rely on traditional medicine due to tradition or lack of alternatives⁽²⁾, but the public in many developed countries are also seeking complementary and alternative medicine, primarily due to the high cost of health insurance, population ageing and other reasons.

With the opportunity for selection and the wide availability of natural health products, the public needs to be aware of the possible risks associated with these products as well as their benefits. Many products contain multiple ingredients that may prove challenging for consumers to make informed choices. Furthermore, consumers sometimes receive misleading promotional information about some herbs or ingredients that may either obscure the risks associated with their use or exaggerate their efficacy. Some examples include the presence of ephedra in products used as diet aids or energy boosters, and ginkgo biloba in products promoted as dietary supplements that enhance memory in healthy individuals⁽³⁾. Users are drawn to herbal supplements in the belief that they must be effective because they have been used by other cultures for centuries, and they must be safe because they are made from plants.

Healthcare professionals need to know whether their patients are using various health products, including natural health products, certain foods, and prescription and non-prescription drugs, in order to evaluate their overall therapy. Patients may be reluctant to discuss the use of natural health products⁽⁴⁾ and may be less likely to report adverse reactions associated with their use, than those associated with conventional over-the-counter medicines⁽⁵⁾. As with conventional medicines, specific groups – pregnant and breastfeeding mothers, children, the elderly, patients with cardiovascular disease, undergoing surgery or using conventional medicines where there is a potential for drug interactions – may be at an increased risk if using complementary and alternative medicines⁽⁶⁾.

The most effective approach to reducing any existing hostility to traditional remedies would be to determine their efficacy and safety by subjecting them to scientific scrutiny in well-designed clinical trials. Orthodox Western medicine may have much to gain from traditional remedies. Many modern (synthetic) pharmaceutical products have been developed from natural sources, and it should not be surprising, therefore, that traditional remedies may have beneficial therapeutic effects. Conversely, we should not presume that such remedies would be intrinsically safer than synthetic pharmaceuticals, although all too often the general public tends to equate natural products with low toxicity despite considerable evidence to the contrary.

Local research ethics committees have to make an informed assessment of the degree of risk and any possible benefits to patients who volunteer to participate in clinical trials, but if the same standards of reassurance about safety and quality were deemed essential, it would be virtually impossible to run a trial.

Yours sincerely,

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