



Aspirin and poetry: Did João Cabral de Melo Neto suffer from acetylsalicylic acid-overuse headache?

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Introduction

João Cabral de Melo Neto is considered one of the most important Brazilian poets of all time. He suffered from severe headaches for the longest part of his life, being diagnosed with migraine. He took a significant amount of acetylsalicylic acid pills every day for many years.

Objective

The objective of this narrative review includes identifying how headache and its treatment influenced João Cabral de Melo Neto's poetry as well as analyzing the correlation between Melo Neto's migraine diagnosis and his documented overuse of aspirin and investigating the possibility of an acetylsalicylic acid-overuse headache diagnosis.

Methods

The authors thoroughly read biographical books and interviews about the life of João Cabral de Melo Neto. They systematically documented all references to headaches and aspirin. Melo Neto's clinical case documented in his biography and interviews were juxtaposed with The International Classification of Headache Disorders (ICHD-3) diagnostic criteria for acetylsalicylic acid-overuse headache diagnosis.

Results

The word "aspirin" appears 8 times in 6 of Melo Neto's poems. He compares it to the sun, attributing to it the capacity to refocus a "blurred body" (his state during a headache). The poet reported that took one aspirin pill every hour every day, for several years.

Conclusions

Headache and the use of acetylsalicylic acid influenced João Cabral de Melo Neto's poetry and life. He presented a risk behavior for developing medication overuse headache, specifically its subform: acetylsalicylic acid-overuse headache.

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Introduction

João Cabral de Melo Neto is considered one of the most important Brazilian poets of all time. Known for his outstanding writing, the author suffered from severe headaches for the longest part of his life, being diagnosed with migraine. It was largely documented that Melo Neto took a significant amount of acetylsalicylic acid pills every day for many years.²⁻⁵ In his poem, “*Num monumento à aspirina*” which translates to “On a monument to aspirin”, Melo compares the acetylsalicylic acid (aspirin) pill to the sun, denoting its capacity to brighten the author’s humor, as said in the earlier mentioned poem.⁶

Methods

Two biographical books about João Cabral de Melo Neto’s life, “*A Milésima Segunda Noite da Paulista*” by Joel Silveira, a collection of texts that includes Silveira’s interview with Melo Neto, “*Gentíssima*” by Maria Ignez Corrêa da Costa Barbosa, which contains an interview with the poet, and “*João Cabral de Melo Neto: Complete Poetry*” published by Alfaguara, a collection of all of the author’s work, were read thoroughly by both authors and all references to headache and aspirin were systematically documented. In addition, Melo Neto’s clinical case documented in his biography and interviews were juxtaposed with The International Classification of Headache Disorders (ICHD-3) diagnostic criteria for acetylsalicylic acid-overuse headache diagnosis.

Results and Discussion

The word “aspirin” appears 8 times in 6 of Melo Neto’s poems (once in each of the following poems: “*Os três mal-amados*”, “*Metadicionário*”, “*A corrente de ar*”, “*O papel em branco*”, “*Epitáfios*”, and three times in “*Num monumento à aspirina*”) in which he compares aspirin to the sun, attributing to aspirin the capacity refocusing a “blurred body”⁵, which was how he described his state during headache. In the interview featured in “*Gentíssima*”, João Cabral de Melo Neto said he started taking aspirin to relieve his pain when he was 17.³

Table 1. Aspirin in the works of João Cabral de Melo Neto.

Poem title (poem title in Portuguese)	Poem verses mentioning aspirin
The three unloved (<i>Os três mal-amados</i>)	Love ate my medicines, my prescriptions, my diets, / It ate my aspirins, my short waves, my X-rays. / It ate my mental tests, my urine tests.
Metadictionary (<i>Metadicionário</i>)	Not even God has the ability/to call himself in any language:/only aspirin exists above/geography and its accents
The air current (<i>A corrente de ar</i>)	The poem, health:/Me looking for the pencil, / Taking aspirin
The blank paper (<i>O papel em branco</i>)	This Sun is not always/It is the natural sun,/It is the aspirin sun,/Small white discs.
Epitaphs (<i>Epitáfios</i>)	Here/João Cabral de Melo/sleeps the sleep for which/he didn't feel sleepy./He fell asleep like day, lightly without aspirin.
On a monument to aspirin (<i>Num monumento à aspirina</i>)	Clearly: the most practical of suns, the sun of an aspirin tablet//Converge: the appearance and effects of the aspirin tablet lens/On the other hand, because internal lens,/or internal use, behind the retina,/it refocuses, for the entire body,/the surrounding blur, and refines it.

Source: the authors

Furthermore, the poet told Joel Silveira in a 1971 interview that he took one aspirin pill every hour, every day, for several years, reducing his daily acetylsalicylic acid intake only in 1971, at the age of 51 years old, when he started to take 1 aspirin pill every 4 hours.⁶ Nonetheless, his headache could not be extinguished by medication, but only moderately relieved. The gathered information about the author’s headache and acetylsalicylic acid over-use fulfill all specific criteria for ICHD-3 medication overuse headache (coded as 8.2 at ICHD-3) and acetylsalicylic acid-overuse (coded as 8.2.3.2.1 at ICHD-3).¹

However, there was not enough evidence of causation documented in the material used in this study and, therefore, the provided information was insufficient to meet all the general criteria necessary for all headaches attributed to a substance or its withdrawal disorders diagnosis, including the ones previously mentioned.

Conclusion

Headache and the use of acetylsalicylic acid influenced João Cabral de Melo Neto’s poetry and life, holding an important source of inspiration for his poems. His interviews and biographies suggest that Melo Neto had a risk behavior



for developing medication overuse headache, specifically its subform: acetylsalicylic acid-overuse headache. Nonetheless, there was not enough documented information that could be used to demonstrate evidence of causation of Melo Neto's abuse of aspirin and his severe headache.

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