



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. 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 pills everyday for many years. In his poem, "Num Monumento à aspirina" which translates to "In a Monument to aspirin", Melo compares the Acetylsalicylic acid (aspirin) pill to the sun, denoting its capacity to brighten the authors humor, as said in the earlier mentioned poem.

Objectives

The objective of this study includes identify how headache and it's treatment influenced João Cabral de Melo Neto's poetry as well as analyze the correlation between Melo Neto's migraine diagnosis and his documented overuse of aspirin and investigate the possibility of an acetylsalicylic acid-overuse headache diagnosis.

Methods

Two biographical books about João Cabral de Melo Neto's life, "A Milésima Segunda Noite na 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

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 "Um monumento à aspirina") in which he compares aspirin to the sun, attributing to aspirin the capacity refocusing a "blurred body", which was how he described his state during headache. "Headache" is featured once in Melo Neto's poetry, in his poem "Os três mal-amados". It was reported by both biographies that João Cabral de Melo Neto suffered from severe headaches since he was 16 years old. In the interview featured in "Gentíssima", João Cabral de Melo Neto said he started taking aspirin to relieve his pain when he was 17. Furthermore, the poet told Joel Silveira in an 1971's interview that he took 1 aspirin pill every hour, everyday, for several years, reducing his daily acetylsalicylic acid intake only in 1971, when he was 51 years old, when he started to take 1 aspirin pill every 4 hours. 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). 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 headache 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 to 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.

Keywords: Headache Disorders; Secondary; Aspirin; Poetry.