

Use of medicinal plants by the population to treat headache

Uso de plantas medicinais pela população para tratar cefaleia

*I*n Brazil there is a great demand for medicinal plants to treat headache from all sectors of the population. Practically all big cities have public markets where many different kinds of vendors offer an enormous variety of plants claiming to treat all types of affections, including migraine and other subtypes of headache. Not infrequently the same plant is recommended for extremely different conditions. The knowledge displayed by the herb vendors has no scientific basis, but is passed from father or mother to their offspring. Many of the concepts came from the Amerindians and later from the African slaves or from Europe during the Portuguese colonization. Recently, the pharmaceutical properties of extracts of many of these plants have been recognized by modern science. Of course, the analgesic benefit produced by the use of plants in their multiple forms of use (e.g. tea, aromatherapy, skin cream, parts of the plants such as leaves, roots, bark, etc.) may be due to a placebo effect. Such placebo analgesia is in fact induced by activation of opioid neurons and can be blocked by an opioid antagonist.

The present author has been using medicinal plants with relative success, particularly in the form of tea, for patients with chronic migraine associated with analgesic abuse as a way to motivate them to stop using analgesic pills completely. A number of plants recommended by the market vendors are native to Brazil.

In conclusion, the use of medicinal plants is an exciting development in the headache arsenal for treating patients with complicated forms of headache.

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