

Ephedra: Herbal Medicine vs. America

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For months now, I have read and heard about all of the harmful side-effects ephedra can cause. During this time, I have not heard the other side of the story discussed in the news. Not once have I read or seen a news report on the positive attributes of ephedra. It is irresponsible reporting to allow one side of this story to be presented without searching out a more complete understanding of what ephedra does. It is not only irresponsible reporting, but irresponsible political awareness on the part of the Chinese herbal community to not respond to the negative press ephedra is receiving.

I also find it unjust to seek out the opinion of a medical doctor when in need of an "educated expert" analysis of a given case of ephedra use. Medical doctors do not spend four years learning the intricacies of herbal formulas. Medical doctors are not required to spend 450 hours in graduate school learning the fine details of how to prescribe herbs like ephedra. Wouldn't it make more sense to call on an herbology expert, such as a doctor of Oriental medicine, to represent the herbology community? Where are our national organizations, such as the AAOM and the Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine Alliance, when topics of this nature present themselves to the public? When Katie Couric runs a story on ephedra, such as she did on "The Today Show" in February, a Chinese herbologist should be included in the panel of experts to give the public an informed opinion on the misuse of these herbal products.

The Chinese have used ephedra safely for thousands of years! However, it seems the media is only interested in scaring the public, not informing them. Ephedra is an important herb. Also known as *ma huang*, it is quite useful in treating patients with acute asthma attacks and severe edema. If administered correctly - and by this, I mean in combination with other herbs, in proper dosages and for a short amount of time - ephedra is a powerful, important herbal remedy. Ask any asthma patient who uses Chinese herbs if he or she wants ephedra banned by the FDA. Ephedra should never be used as a weight loss supplement or by patients with high blood pressure, as it was by Steve Bechler, the Baltimore Orioles pitcher who died earlier this year. It is the ignorance about herbs like ma huang and how they should be used that kills people, not the herbs themselves.

I do agree that ephedra should be controlled and used only by properly trained practitioners (i.e., a certified herbologist). The Chinese do not use ephedra as a diet supplement. It has been misused completely by companies like Metabolife, which promote it as a weight-loss supplement. In Chinese medicine, ephedra is used in much smaller doses and only for short periods of time. There have never been any reported cases of death in China due to ephedra, where competent practitioners commonly use it.

Those interested in understanding more about ephedra (and educating the American public about the proper ways to use this herb) should contact a licensed acupuncturist and certified Chinese herbologist. Contact the local Chinese medicine college and interview a professor from the herbology department to get another side of the story. More importantly, the public should not have to find a qualified professional who understands Chinese herbology; these individuals should contact the local media to counteract the negative press being given to ephedra.

What will we do when more of our herbs begin to be questioned? Are we going to watch the FDA take away one of our important methods of treatment? Chinese herbs like ephedra should be regulated so that companies like Metabolife cannot misuse them; however, if our profession does not stand up and make its voice heard now, these herbs will be taken away.

It is important to remember that herbs have been used for thousands of years. Many current pharmacological drugs came from the isolated chemical constituents of these herbs. When understood and used correctly, these herbs have amazing results; however, when used ignorantly and with little awareness, these herbs have side-effects like any pharmaceutical drug. Living in a consumer-driven society like America, the public should be educated correctly on the proper uses of herbs like ephedra. I hope this article is a step in that direction.

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