Anesthesiology 2013; 118:1261-3

Dahan et al.


EDITORIAL VIEWS

ANESTHESIOLOGY REFLECTIONS FROM THE WOOD LIBRARY-MUSEUM

From Fish Poison to Merck Picrotoxin

For countless centuries, many fishermen in South and Southeast Asia used a stupefying fish poison derived from the seeds of the fishberry shrub (Anamirta cocculus). Picrotoxin, the active ingredient of fishberry seeds, acts as a noncompetitive GABA_A receptor antagonist. A neurostimulant and occasional convulsant, picrotoxin can block chloride conductance enhanced by GABA_A receptor agonists such as propofol and barbiturates. Thus, picrotoxin has been employed to investigate anesthetic mechanisms of action at the GABA_A receptor, as well as used as an antidote for barbiturate toxicity. Manufactured by Merck in Germany, the bottle of picrotoxin (above) is now part of the collection of the Wood Library-Museum. (Copyright © the American Society of Anesthesiologists, Inc.)

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