



SAPUCAINHA OIL IN THE FIGHT AGAINST LEPROSY IN BRAZIL: FROM THEODORO PECKOLT TO PABLO SEABRA

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Abstract

The theory of a specific drug, i.e., one single drug for each single disease, greatly challenged the 19th century pharmacists. Many pharmacists and chemists believed specific drugs could only emerge from the active ingredients in plants. Plant extraction methods, mainly of organic acids and bases, characterized this period. Some Brazilian plants were studied for the treatment of diseases later to be classified as tropical diseases, e.g., leprosy.

This work examines the studies of Theodoro Peckholt and Pablo Seabra, undertaken between mid-19th and early 20th centuries, on the treatment of leprosy with sapucainha.

The Brazilian vegetal species *Carpotroche brasiliensis*, popularly known as sapucainha, was frequently used, until mid-20th century, in the treatment of leprosy and other cutaneous infections. In the oil of its seeds cyclopentene fatty acids are found, valuable raw material in the synthesis of biologically active compounds. The subsequent identification of this species turned this Flacurtiaceae family into the main supplier of these oils in Brazil.

In 1861, Peckolt presented his work on the pharmacological and therapeutic properties of the sapucainha oil. He also obtained cyclopentene fatty acids from its oil in 1866, thirteen years prior to John Moss isolating them from the oil of chaulmugra Indiana.

As chaulmugra oil, the sapucainha oil is badly tolerated by the digestive tract, frequently provoking anorexia, gastric pains, nausea and vomit. In 1926, Seabra named sapucainha the Brazilian chaulmugra, and started a series of studies using the total acids of sapucainha in colloidal hydrosol to produce a copper soap. The successfulness of this salt was disseminated in international scientific meetings throughout the world.