Substandard Ergot May Be Harmless

Medicine

Commission Formed To Investigate Its Effects

WHETHER or not officials of the food and Drug Administration of the Department of Agriculture have been lax in enforcing the laws and allowed the sale of deteriorated ergot, the health and safety of American mothers may not have been so much affected after all, it appeared from testimony presented at the hearing before the Senate committee on agriculture and forests.

That the food and drug officials were allowing the illegal sale of a fluidextract from rotten, mouldy, wormy ergot was charged by Howard W. Ambruster, drug importer of New York City. Ambruster has claimed that because this substandard ergot was allowed to be imported and sold, he could not find a market for his own superior but slightly more expensive importation. Ambruster has placed considerable emphasis on the fact that this drug is widely used in childbirth and that the lives and health of American mothers are imperilled because a substandard product is on the market.

Prof. Torald Sollman of Western Reserve University said that he was not sure whether it would be dangerous to use a fluidextract made from rotten, mouldy ergot. He did think it would be undesirable, but on further questioning stated that the rottenness or mouldiness or worminess of the crude ergot would not affect the physiological activity of the fluidextract and that as long as the extract was of the standard physiological strength, he did not think any harm would result from using it.

Prof. Sollmann said he had no evidence that the Department of Agriculture was derelict in its duty in respect to the enforcement of the food and drug law, and that his impression was quite the other way.

Prof. Henry H. Rusby of the New York College of Pharmacy, Columbia University, Dr. E. J. Ill, chairman of the special ergot investigation committee of the American Association of Obstetricians, Gynecologists and Abdominal Surgeons, and Dr. Harvey Wiley, father of the food and drug law, were heard at the first day's hearing. Dr. Wiley said that while he has the highest respect for the officers of the Food and Drug Administration, he feels that the charges against them are just in many respects.

Dr. Rusby's testimony brought out the fact that there is no reliable test for the efficacy of fluid extract of ergot except the clinical one which the doctor makes when he gives it to his patient. For this reason it is necessary that the fluid extract be made only from ergot of the best quality, as specified in the U. S. Pharmacopoeia, which is the legal standard. For some years prior to 1927, officials of the Food and Drug Administration were allowing substandard ergot to be used in the manufacture of the extract, if the latter could be made to meet a biological test. This is in violation of the law, Dr. Rusby charged.

Upon questioning by Senator Royal S. Copeland of New York City, himself a physician, Dr. Rusby admitted that there is a point in the manufacture of the fluidextract when no one could tell except by clinical test whether the extract is any good or not. Lack of funds for sufficient inspection by the Food and Drug Administration was suggested as a factor in the situation. To this Dr. Rusby heartily agreed.

AN investigation of possible harmfulness of ergot fluid extract when it is made from moldy or wormy ergot is shortly to be undertaken by a scientific commission to be appointed by Dr. E. Fullerton Cook, of Philadelphia, chairman of the Committee on Revision of the Pharmacopoeia of the United States.

Dr. Cook said it was his interpretation of the present law that sub-standard raw materials could come in providing they were plainly labeled as being below standard in certain particulars. He said it was the custom of the Food and Drugs administration to allow reliable manufacturers to take such raw material and make therefrom drugs which in their manufactured state would clearly meet the requirements of the U. S. Pharmacopoeia. Benzoin was a point in instance, he said. Nature had not met the requirements of the U. S. Pharmacopoeia in some years, but the tincture of benzoin put upon the market would be up to standard, nevertheless.

So far as ergot is concerned, Dr. Cook said there was no scientific evidence as to what harm might be done by the fluid extract made from raw material which was moldy and wormy, though certain requirements of potency might be met by the cockscomb test. He said he wanted it clearly understood that he was not endorsing the use of moldy or wormy material.

If the scientific tests show that harm does result and that women are in danger of infection from the use of ergot made from the poor quality raw material, he said that the requirements would be so modified as to make an exception in the case of ergot with the effect that the U. S. Pharmacopoeia standard would virtually put an embargo on fluid extract made from moldy or wormy material.

Senator Burton K. Wheeler of Montana, at whose insistence the hearings have been held, believes that the present airing of facts will clear up the entire ergot situation.

"What is inconceivable to me," he states, "is that no tests have ever been made to determine what bad effect this fluid extract might have when made from impure materials.

I understand that instead of making such tests, doctors have simply declined to run the risk of using it, and in many cases have abandoned this type of treatment."

The Department of Agriculture becomes perhaps unjustly subject to criticism as a result of the loophole in the law which allows sub-standard material to come in and be put in the hands of manufacturers, Senator Wheeler asserted.

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Mayan Indians of the prehistoric American tropics used pottery stamps to impress colored designs on their bodies, according to J. Eric Thompson, archaeologist.

More than 8,000 specimens of flowers and other forms of plant life of the Amazon Valley have been collected by the Marshall Field Botanical Expedition to the Amazon.