Podophyllin—the early days

Records of the medicinal use of podophyllin and its derivatives go back over 200 years, long before they became known for the treatment of genital warts. Podophyllum peltatum is a flowering perennial, widely spread throughout North America. The Indians knew of the medical properties of its rhizome, and this knowledge reached the early colonists and, in due course, their doctors. Podophyllin was regarded as an excellent emetic and cathartic, at a time when purging was an important part of medical treatment, and also as a hepatic stimulant. It was included in the first United States Pharmacopoeia, published in 1820. Podophyllin resin was separated from the crude rhizome in 1835, and was thereafter preferred as the more refined product. Another species, Podophyllum emodi, which grows in the Himalayas, was described in 1839. It had similar properties to P peltatum, but it was not widely used; most podophyllin preparations, even in India, were imported from the United States.

The drug soon became popular among the "eclectic" sect of practitioners, who made special use of indigenous plant remedies. It was said that podophyllin was not only a cathartic and cholagogue, but of value in respiratory, renal, rheumatic, and menstrual disorders. It was found to be irritant when applied to the skin, and this led to its use as a counterirritant for the treatment of neuralgia and synovitis, although the resulting cutaneous inflammation could be severe. There can be no doubt that in the United States at this time podophyllin was regarded as a valuable drug by both doctors and laymen. It was manufactured on a large scale: in 1860, 2000 kilograms were marketed. As information about the "new American remedy" crossed the Atlantic, review articles appeared in the English medical press in 1861 and 1862, and The Lancet published enthusiastic letters from readers who had prescribed the drug. It soon appeared in the British Pharmacopoeia in the form of a powder and tincture, and non-official preparations in which the podophyllin was mixed with other drugs were developed.

In the mid 19th century, pharmacology was in a chaotic state. Many botanical and chemical substances were available, and polypharmacy, with long winded prescriptions, was the rule. The action of some individual drugs was understood, but podophyllin was not one of these. By the end of the century interest had waned, and its use had diminished to the treatment of constipation (when it was usually combined with other products) and of so called "functional disorders of the liver." The latter was a vaguely defined syndrome consisting of headache, depression, anorexia, abdominal discomfort, and constipation. Podophyllin was believed, incorrectly, to increase the flow of bile and had a reputation, particularly among the laity, for the relief of the condition; it was a constituent of several proprietary remedies, of which Carter's Little Liver Pills (a combination of podophyllin and aloes) were one. Some individuals took regular small doses of these products indefinitely.

Eventually, the indications for podophyllin were reduced to its use as a hydrogogue purgative, and even here, in due course, it was replaced by less violent remedies. Its escharotic properties had not been completely forgotten, however. For many years urologists in New Orleans had treated genital warts with podophyllin, but the treatment was not generally known until 1942, when Isaac Kaplan, working with the United States Army in New Orleans, reported that condylomata acuminata regressed after applications of 25% podophyllin suspended in mineral oil. At this point "the door opened and let the future in."