Introduction

Oncology 1986;43(suppl. 1):1

Request for an Impartial Discussion of the So-Called Mistletoe Therapy

For thousands of years European mistletoe (Viscum album L.) has been used for a wide variety of therapeutic purposes. Mistletoe preparations have been used against epilepsy, infertility, hypertension, debility and connective tissue disorders. Currently, there is increasing interest in the application of mistletoe preparations against cancer.

It is notable that in the traditions of many peoples and cultures mistletoe was reputedly a ‘magical’ plant. Of course, this is also true for other pharmacologically active plants, but up to the present century, the proportion of publications on mistletoe with an origin in superstition, mysticism and national customs has been disproportionately high. For example, a comparison of the literature on mistletoe with that on Ricinus communis L. reveals that this other traditionally exploited plant has for a long time been the subject of a much greater number of scientifically oriented studies.

Those engaged in the laboratory in the isolation and the biochemical and pharmacological characterization of mistletoe constituents are therefore aware of an urgent need to catch up. Nevertheless, in recent decades, investigations have been carried out which have enriched our knowledge, and this is borne out by the contributions to the present volume.

At present, mistletoe preparations are especially favored by the advocates of alternative medicine. The relationship between the latter and members of the orthodox medical profession is frequently marked by nonproductive polemics and the lack of a critically constructive dialogue. A way out of this situation is indicated by Nagel and Schmahl [1], who quite appropriately stated: ‘Practically all medicaments used in orthodox medicine were also discovered empirically, but they were not officially admitted until they had been submitted to often long and painstaking investigation and intensive analysis, then further developed to their optimally effective form.’ Elsewhere, they write: ‘If, as certainly seems to be the case, single medicaments have a certain antitumor activity, then it seems likely that this activity can be greatly improved if the material is properly tested and developed further in the light of the results.’

The editors hope that the papers presented here will form a relevant basis for discussion, and that they will enable a better evaluation of many points of view of alternative medicine.

In his classical work on mistletoe, which appeared in 1923, von Tubeuf [2] wrote as follows. ‘My chief objective was to finally put in its rightful place the plain truth regarding all areas of mistletoe research, and to blow away the chaff that has lain on the corn for 2,000 years.’ The editors and authors of the present supplement feel bound by this maxim of von Tubeuf, which is still (unfortunately!) topical and relevant.

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References

Tubeuf, K. von; Monographic der Mistel (Oldenbourg, Munchen 1923).