

**THE PHYSIOLOGICAL
AND THERAPEUTICAL
ACTION OF ERGOT**

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The Physiological and Therapeutical Action of Ergot by Etienne Evetzky

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ETIENNE EVETZKY

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1882

P R E F A C E .

EVERY one familiar with the history of medicine will acknowledge that the system of therapeutics of a given period is the logical outcome of the pathological ideas of the day. During the reign of the humoral pathology, when disease was considered to be due to some change or impurity of the blood, the indication was invariably to cleanse the system or to modify the blood. To obtain these results, the treatment consisted in the use of alteratives, purges, diuretics, expectorants, emetics, emmenagogues, counter-irritants, etc. At the time of the appearance of Virchow's "Cellular Pathology," the progressive portion of the profession had become utterly tired of the metaphysical, fanciful, and totally untenable pathological ideas constituting humoralism, and of the therapeutic methods resulting from them. The reaction gave rise to the motto, "Hands off!" The profession, like a man suddenly transferred to entirely new surroundings, had taken a very undecided and wavering stand with regard to therapeutics. The former attempts at radical cure, or at reaching the essential nature of the disease, were abandoned; where it was practicable, the disease was allowed to follow its course; treatment, in fact, assumed an essentially symptomatic, expectant, and palliative character, retaining, of course, the empirical facts obtained during centuries of practice. Under the healthful influence of the revolution inaugurated by Virchow, the study of the action of remedies received new life, while pathology was steadily resolving itself into a gradually diminish-

ing number of ultimate morbid processes, the nature of which was becoming clearer and clearer. After nearly half a century of this combined work, these two streams, formerly parallel, began to converge, and, being at first separated by a vast space, they are now to be seen at a glance, and readily connected with each other. Having reached this stage, we have acquired a solid foundation to build rational therapeutics upon. We appreciate the complexity of disease and the limitation of our curative powers; in this we differ from our colleagues of past centuries; but, on the other hand, we find that the empiricism and the methods of expectancy and non-interference, in vogue some years ago, have outlived their time. We realize that we must be rational in the use of drugs when we can, and empirical only if we must, and that we possess greater power in dealing with disease than was conceded not a very long time ago. The position of ergot in this respect is particularly favorable. The chemical composition and the physiological properties of this drug are well understood, while the morbid conditions referable to the latter are readily pointed out.

It seems strange, then, that in none of the leading works on therapeutics the uses of ergot in disease have been treated with proper completeness and system. In undertaking the present work my object was to present in a condensed manner all the therapeutic possibilities of ergot. In a task of this nature, original research is out of the question. No one man's evidence is sufficient to establish the merits of a drug considered in the manner indicated, and no one man's opportunities are sufficient to grasp the entire subject. Consequently it remained to gather from the volumes of past and current periodical literature the testimony of the multitude of physicians that had been led to use ergot in different morbid conditions. I have recorded everything that has come to my notice; I have grouped and classified the immense material in our possession. In all cases in which the action of ergot could be explained, I have attempted to do so, although this task is frequently difficult, if not impossible. I have pointed out some properties of ergot which are

not apparent when we study its physiological action or its toxic effects. This difference between the action of drugs in the normal and morbid conditions of the system is not sufficiently appreciated, and we still labor under the impression that we obtain a perfect insight into the therapeutic possibilities of a remedy from the manner in which it affects the system in health. The reader will see that ergot has been used in a large number of diseases; some of these uses have little or no practical value, yet it is very important to know them, as they serve to illustrate the therapeutic properties of the drug. They have been brought to the notice of the reader without any comments, but those that are essential and of the greatest practical importance have been dealt with more fully. Among the latter may be mentioned the use of ergot in inflammation, aneurism, cardiac diseases, the post-parturient state, uterine fibroid tumors, rheumatism, etc.

This work was published at first *seriatim* in the "The New York Medical Journal and Obstetrical Review," and is now issued in book form, to place it within the reach of the profession at large.

E. E.

NEW YORK, 1882.

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THE
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PART I.

E R G O T .

SYNONYMS.—Ergota* (U. S. and Br. Ph.), ergot, ergot of rye spurred rye, cockspar rye, etc.; *Fr.*: ergot, ergot de blé, ergot de seigle, seigle ergoté, etc.; *Ger.*: Mutterkorn, Ergot.

HISTORY. †—Undoubtedly our first knowledge of the medicinal virtues of ergot was obtained at the price of numerous epidemics of ergotism which visited Europe in the early ages after seasons of rain and scarcity. The information we have in relation to the earliest epidemics permits us only to assume that they were ergot diseases. But as to later ones, beginning with the tenth century, we can positively identify the usual forms of ergot poisoning in the description given. Dangerous properties of ergot became known quite early. According to Mézeray, Sigebert de Gremlour pointed out, in 1096, the connection of epidemics with the abundant presence of ergot in rye. It is impossible to indicate at what period ergot began to be used for medicinal purposes. The earliest references show that

* In French, *ergot* signifies cockspar.

† Stillé, "Therapeutics and Materia Medica," vol. ii, p. 717, Phila.; S. Wright, "Edinburgh Med. and Surg. Jour.," lii, p. 298, liii, p. 1.