



Miracle Drugs Have Drawbacks; Legislature Wants Them Labeled

Assemblyman, 68th District There's an ancient adage to the effect that "desperate diseases require desperate remedies." But the question as to whether a particular remedy is too desperate, and therefore dangerous, is really a tough one in this age of advanced medical research. Nevertheless, a query of this nature has recently been laid in the lap of one of our Senate fact-finding committees, and so will probably come before the full Legislature at our next regular session.

The so-called wonder drugs—the antibiotics—opened a new era of medical control over many germ-caused diseases less than a generation ago. But experience demonstrated that they are not panaceas—cure alls—and must be used with adequate precautions against harmful side-effects. Starting with the granddaddy of them all, penicillin, research scientists have developed a wide range of such remedies, much used by physicians everywhere.

ONE ANTIBIOTIC, chloromycetin, has been in wide use for the past 12 years. The particular advantage claimed for it is its ability to knock out stubborn and persistent infections. It is said to be very useful in attacking staphylococcal infections which are resistant to penicillin and similar drugs.

However, chloromycetin is alleged to have one serious and sometimes fatal side-effect, in that it occasionally causes aplastic anemia in patients for whom it is prescribed. At least one death in California is attributed to it.

A BILL WAS introduced at our last session which would have required that a druggist selling a dangerous drug such as this one, even on prescription, furnish the buyer with a written statement regarding the dangerous character of the drug. The bill was not passed, but was referred to the Senate fact-finding committee on public health for interim study. This group recently held a two-day hearing on the subject.

Witnesses who testified at this meeting included spokesmen for medical schools, the state department of public health, as well as representatives of persons alleged to have incurred the dread form of anemia because of treatment with the drug. One was the newspaperman of a teenage girl victim of the disease.

THE COMMITTEE was told that 400 deaths have occurred

throughout the nation because of improper use of the drug. This assertion was contradicted by another speaker who fixed the deathrate at not more than 1 in 225,000 among the 25 million persons to whom the drug has been administered. On this basis, the total deaths would not exceed 120. Physicians who spoke agreed that chloromycetin can be dangerous unless it is properly used, and unless adequate blood tests are given to patients for whom it is prescribed. They said the drug does save lives, however, when no other remedy works. They stated that the risk of fatality is really very small in view of the good properties of the drug, so physicians should be free to prescribe it in cases of persistent infection. It was pointed out to the committee that present federal law requires special labelling on all containers of the drug.

SPOKESMEN for the victims strongly urge that law be enacted to make proper labelling of the drug mandatory, so that both physicians and patient will be warned of possible harmful effects.

Other witnesses cautioned the committee against closing the door to future medical progress. Research is still going on, it was said, designed to eliminate any dangerous features of the drug. In the meantime, more education as to its effects is the best answer.

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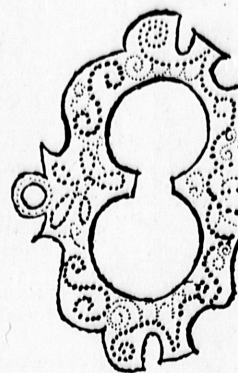
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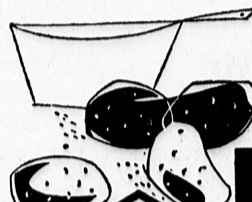
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