

"Bee Sting Therapy": The Revival of a Dangerous Practice

Sir,

Followers of alternative medicine claim that bee sting therapy ("Apitherapia"), which is said to have been practised since the age of ancient Egypt, can bring benefit to many human diseases, including "articular inflammation, haematoma, neuralgia, sciatica, allergy and hay-fever" (1). The revulsive properties displayed by "bee whole body" (2) (i.e. by honeybee venom, which is made up of a mixture of various autacoids, allergens and toxic enzymes (3)) could account for transient pain relief in minor rheumatic syndromes. Recently we have noted a remarkable increase of patients damaged by such "treatments". Many of these patients suffered from sciatic pain due to diskal herniation. No fewer than 15 bee stings were usually inflicted to lumbar skin during every apitherapeutic séance, at a cost that could reach 200.000 Italian lire (about 120\$), inclusive of exposition to anaphylactic risk. In almost all cases granulomata due to retention of stinger fragments developed in the form of dusky red-brown papulonodules, 3-10 mm in diameter, often surmounted by a small torpid exudating ulcer. The histological aspect was typical (foreign-body granuloma (4)). Some patients were told that stinger removal would probably prevent the development of beneficial effects: surely multiple granuloma formation has actually prevented surgery for worsening disk disease, since these granulomata do not heal spontaneously, are unresponsive to corticosteroid infiltration, and have to be removed surgically. Besides, we have noted that patients who undergo bee sting therapy are often graduates of a high socio-

economical level, and this fact seems puzzling. Anyway it is certainly depressing to remark that most "apitherapists" have a regular degree in medicine and practise in well-organised centers on patients referred by rheumatologists and allergologists (sic!). We fear that increasing medical underemployment in Italy (in Europe?), coupled with the greed for money, could lead to the development of aggressive and unscrupulous trends in charlatanry. Bee sting therapy is certainly an important clue in this respect, though not the only one, at least in our dermatological experience.

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