Of Toads, Porcupines, and Rats

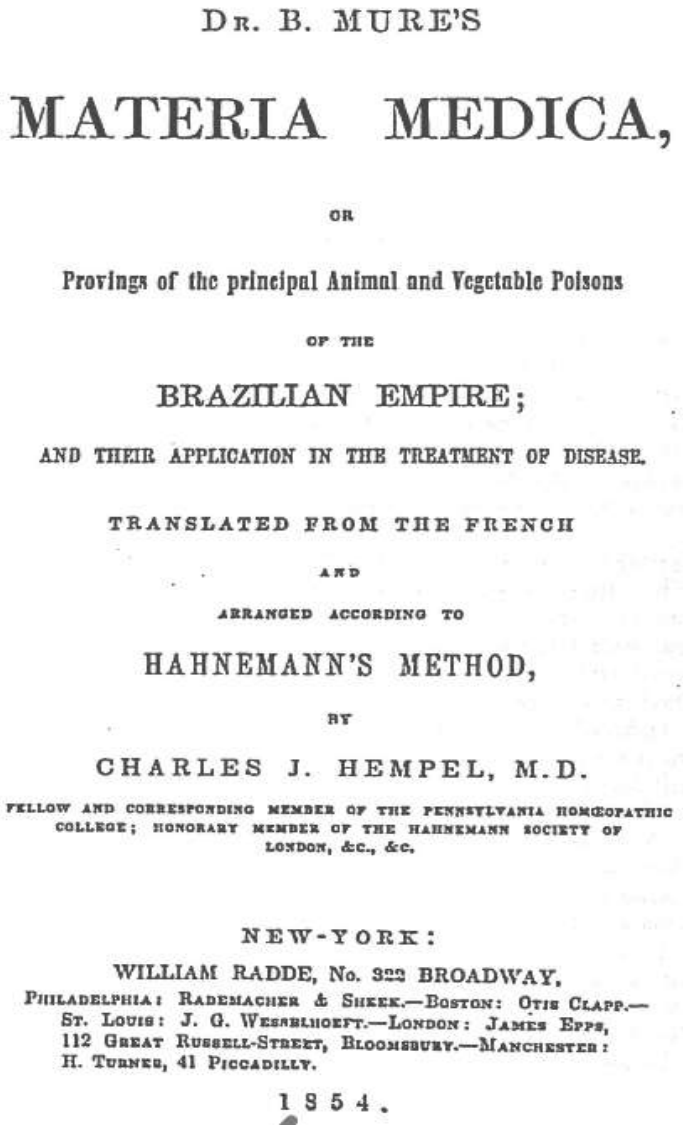
A plea for a clear taxonomy

Jörg Wichmann published in Spectrum of Homeopathy, 2014

As long as we are only dealing with polychrests, the identity of homeopathic remedies presents us with no particular problems. The making of the alchemical remedies that Hahnemann himself produced – Causticum, Hepar sulfuris, Mercurius solubilis – is described well enough and has been faithfully imitated by a number of diligent homeopathic pharmacies, including Gudjons (Germany), Helios (England), Leonardo (Germany), and Remedia (Austria).

Those who are considering the use of less well-known remedies or would like to know about all the obscure remedy abbreviations that pop up during repertorization will quickly run into the problem that the identity of many older remedies cannot be unequivocally clarified, even with the help of the available scientific literature. This also means that we are unable to produce new batches of such remedies – we have to rely on the old supplies left in the vials from the past. The problems with Natrium muriaticum, Petroleum, Theridion, or Tarentula cubensis are well-known. But modern, inadequately specified remedy provings can be equally problematic, causing endless confusion.

I have researched the ambiguous remedies as far as possible for the systematics homeopathy database at www.provings.info. Using a few examples, I would like to explain the difficulties involved in clarifying these remedies and how best to resolve this.



DR. B. MURE'S

MATERIA MEDICA,

OR

Provings of the principal Animal and Vegetable Poisons

OF THE

BRAZILIAN EMPIRE;

AND THEIR APPLICATION IN THE TREATMENT OF DISEASE.

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH

AND

ARRANGED ACCORDING TO

HAHNEMANN'S METHOD,

BY

CHARLES J. HEMPEL, M.D.

FELLOW AND CORRESPONDING MEMBER OF THE PENNSYLVANIA HOMŒOPATHIC COLLEGE; HONORARY MEMBER OF THE HAHNEMANN SOCIETY OF LONDON, &c., &c.

NEW-YORK:

WILLIAM RADDE, No. 322 BROADWAY.

PHILADELPHIA: RADEMACHER & SHEEK.—BOSTON: OTIS CLAPP.—ST. LOUIS: J. G. WESSELHOEFT.—LONDON: JAMES EPPS, 112 GREAT RUSSELL-STREET, BLOOMSBURY.—MANCHESTER: H. TURNER, 41 PICCADILLY.

1854.

Toads

In our repertories we normally find two toads: Bufo bufo (sometimes the same animal is incorrectly referred to as Bufo rana) and Bufo sahytiensis. A search in the zoological literature for the latter is fruitless since this name is only used in homeopathic texts. So what toad are we actually talking about here? While searching for old remedy provings, I stumbled on the book by Benoit Mure about the remedies and provings he collected in South America. Allen writes in his encyclopedia: "A South American toad, to which this name has been given by Dr. Mure, in his *Pathogenesie Brazilienne*." Thanks to the relentless onward march of digitalization for older library works, this book is now freely available at Google Books.

BUFO SAHYTIENSIS. (Nobis.)

BUFO. BUFO AGUA (LAT.) TOAD.

This toad is found all over America; it inhabits swamps and marshy regions. It is as big as two fists, though its size varies a good deal. It is readily known by its enormous rhomboïdal parotids, whence it sends forth a large quantity of poison. Its head is flat, triangular, more large than long; it shows a strong osseous edge, commencing at the tip of the muzzle, thence stretching towards the inner angle of the eye, round this organ, and finally terminating behind the lids. The eye and the tympanic wall are very large. The trunk, which is very large anteriorly, in consequence of the large development of the parotides, is covered, on each side of the dorsal spine, with two irregular rows of large elliptical or conical bladders; sometimes there are such bladders on the sides. The anterior extremities do not reach to the end of the trunk; the posterior extremities reach beyond the muzzle by the length of the fourth toe. The toes are rather flattened; the first toe is longer than the second. Its colors are various, consisting of a number of brown spots, which coalesce on the back, and are separated on the abdomen by yellowish dots.

The horrible croaking of these animals is well known, and might rouse the indignation of the most phlegmatic individual.

By exciting the animal, we caused it to spirt its saliva, which we collected on a little sugar of milk, and at once prepared, by trituration.

Apart from the case of Bufo sahytiensis, this book is in many other ways a treasure trove – below we will discuss a second remedy from the book. If we look in the original for toads, we can quickly resolve the question of mistaken identity. On the one hand, it is not clear from the text why Mure chose this name; on the other hand, his suffix *(Nobis.) = "from us"* makes it clear that he himself chose the name, which is not commonly used. But we can find the commonly used name in the next line of his text: Bufo agua (lat.). Unfortunately homeopathic authors subsequently used Mure's own term instead of the more commonly used and accepted one.

A search for Bufo agua quickly makes clear that this is in fact an older synonym for the universally accepted term Aga toad, known zoologically nowadays as Bufo marinus or Rhinella marina. The name Bufo agua was assigned in 1801 by Latreille, although Linneaus had already stipulated the name Rana marina in 1758, which is why – following the international rules of taxonomy – the correct term must be Bufo marinus if the name of the genus has been changed to Bufo. Or if we follow other authors who put this toad in another genus, it would be called Rhinella marina.

The highly accurate description given by Mure indeed confirms this supposition.

So we can nowadays say with a high degree of confidence that the homeopathic remedy Bufo sahytiensis does not come from some exotic unknown creature but rather from the tropical toad that is most widely found in the world. This gives us a decisive advantage: we can safely conduct modern remedy provings with the poison of this species.

Incidentally, the Aga toad is the biggest known toad and has been used all over the world to combat pests – indeed it is found so widely that it itself has become a pest in some areas. Its poison is used as a hallucinogen in some places.

Porcupines

The "creative" naming used by Mr Mure also led to further confusion in other newly discovered homeopathic remedies. There is a creature clearly called a porcupine with the name Spiggurus martini (Nobis.). Once again, Mure's suffix *"(Nobis.)"* indicates that the name came from his own pen – in a fit of originality, he named the proved species after his prover Jo. Vincente Martins.

SPIGGURUS MARTINI. (Nobis.)

SPIG. SPIGGURUS SPINOSA (FR. CUV.) HISTRIX SUBSPINOSUS.
THE PORCUPINE.

This little animal is common in Brazil where it lives on trees and secures itself by means of its hind-feet, it uses its tail, which is pretty long, as a means of descending. Its length, from the muzzle to the tip of the tail, is about a foot; the tail is almost as long as the trunk. The upper parts of the body are covered with sharp prickles about an inch and a half long, and attached to the skin by means of a very thin pedicle. The head-prickles are white at the base, black in the middle and of a yellowish-brown at the top, the dorsal prickles are of a sulphur-yellow at their base. The prickles on the rump and the first third of the tail, are black at their extremity. All the prickles are very close together, mingled with a few long and fine hairs. The lower limbs are covered with a grayish fur, interspersed with little prickles; the tail is furnished with prickles at its upper part, and is covered with stiff and black hairs; the extremity of the tail is bare.

We triturate the prickles taken from one of the sides.

Prover: *Jo. Vincente Martins.*

But this porcupine is a trickier customer than the toad: this time it is not quite so easy to pin down the naming as it was with the toad, where it would have clarified matters to have simply used the correct name in the first place. Mure provides two differing and contradictory names: the genus Histrix or Hystrix is only found in the “old world“ whereas Spiggurus or – as we would say – Sphiggurus – is typically found in South America. The two genera even belong to different families: Hystricidae and Erethizontidae. This means we can exclude the ground-dwelling Hystrix because the text makes it clear that the animal concerned lives in the trees.

At the end of the first Latin name given by Mure we find the abbreviation "*(Fr. Cuv.)"*. A taxonomic search indicates that the valid zoological definition Sphiggurus spinosus was assigned by the French zoologist F. Cuvier in 1823 (see the ITIS report). Despite his "creativity," Mure fortunately left us a hint to the common scientific term. So we can safely say in this case that we are dealing with the South American porcupine Sphiggurus spinosus. A spine from the animal is triturated to make the remedy.

Rats

As mentioned above, opaque taxonomy is not just an irritation of the old literature, but (unfortunately) also bedevils modern remedy proving. In a scientific era in which the precise identification of an animal is very easy, it is particularly annoying and unnecessary to find remedies named "butterfly" (180,000 remedies) or "dolphin milk" (40 species) still being published.

It is not much better when we only think we know what substance we are talking about, as used to be the case for rats. In homeopathic remedy provings and in the manufacture of remedies, there were apparently two different rat remedies to be found: "Rattus rattus" and "Rattus norvegicus." R. rattus, the house rat, is a small black species of rat that has now become rare and is threatened with extinction in some parts of Europe. Rattus norvegicus is the rat we all think of when we hear the term: the common water and sewer rat (also known as brown rat) which is very widespread on account of its high intelligence and persistence, and is also known as a carrier of disease. These two remedies were mentioned separately by the homeopathic pharmacies and in the repertories, and could be ordered as two different remedies. More precise research has established, however, that the remedy called Rattus rattus originates from Jayesh Shah, who has done a (so-far unpublished) remedy proving – for which he used a male sample of the common rat from the sewers of Bombay (Rattus norvegicus). So there is in fact no processed remedy from Rattus rattus, only from Rattus norvegicus!

It is one of the essential tasks of the homeopathic website and database www.provings.info to research such issues and then publish a clarification. There you can always find the current state of knowledge about the identity of remedies under the relevant remedy name. We are always very grateful for hints and tips about possible inconsistencies or ambiguities or about problems that we (think we) have already clarified.

Ambiguous classifications occur not only in the old homeopathic literature but are also found in modern remedy provings. One example is the two rat remedies Rattus rattus and Rattus norvegicus, which were confused until recently.