

From Fish Poison to Merck Picrotoxin



For countless centuries, many fishermen in South and Southeast Asia used a stupefying fish poison derived from the seeds of the fishberry shrub (*Anamirta cocculus*). Picrotoxin, the active ingredient of fishberry seeds, acts as a noncompetitive GABA_A receptor antagonist. A neurostimulant and occasional convulsant, picrotoxin can block chloride conductance enhanced by GABA_A receptor agonists such as propofol and barbiturates. Thus, picrotoxin has been employed to investigate anesthetic mechanisms of action at the GABA_A receptor, as well as used as an antidote for barbiturate toxicity. Manufactured by Merck in Germany, the bottle of picrotoxin (*above*) is now part of the collection of the Wood Library-Museum. (Copyright © the American Society of Anesthesiologists, Inc.)

George S. Bause, M.D., M.P.H., Honorary Curator, ASA's Wood Library-Museum of Anesthesiology, Park Ridge, Illinois, and Clinical Associate Professor, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio. UJYC@aol.com.