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.)

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