



# Extrax Fax

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OVER 400 EXTRACTS AND FORMULATIONS

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## Special Feature

# Draco Refutes Herb Toxicity Claims

Health Products Business magazine this month printed this letter (June '99, p.8) written by our marketer addressing some misinformation over the herb *Huperzia serrata*. Because we are passionate about the use of whole herbs or Full Spectrum extracts, it is disconcerting when unsubstantiated information is being widely distributed claiming toxicity of an herb. Our guess is that promoters of purified Huperzine A may not want manufacturers to use the far less expensive whole herb product:

Dear Editor:

In your February issue this year, Dr. Morton Walker wrote a brief article on the merits of Huperzine A, a standardized and purified compound isolated from the Asian Lycopodium herb *Huperzia serrata*. The compound is being offered to the marketplace as an acetylcholinesterase inhibitor,

capable of supporting memory enhancement by helping to prevent the breakdown of acetylcholine in the brain.

I would like to make a clarification to a point that was made in the article as well as to a subsequent erroneous statement that was made in a correction to the article that was printed in your April issue. While I agree for the most part with Dr. Walker's purport, I believe that the article and correction inaccurately represent the potential merits of using an extract of the whole herb, *Huperzia serrata* as a dietary supplement for supporting memory. He made the statement: "Used for centuries in Chinese folk medicine to treat fever and inflammation, HupA (Huperzine A) is confirmed to be a potent blocker of the enzyme acetylcholinesterase..." In actuality, the Chinese do not have a long term traditional use of the purified compound; they have only used the whole herb or simple extractions thereof.

I suspect, however, that Dr. Walker made the statement in good faith and true to his resources. For example, a popular source of information on Huperzine A is a Keats Good Health Guide booklet called Huperzine A: Boost Your Brain Power by D. Bagchi and J. Barilla (Keats Publishing: New Canaan, CT, 1998) which makes the similar statement: "Huperzine A (Hup A) is found in an extract from the club moss *Huperzia serrata*, which grows at high elevations and in cold climates. It has been used for centuries in Chinese folk medicine, and is also known as Qian Ceng Ta." Qian Ceng Ta actually refers to the whole herb, but it is easy to see how wording such as this may have been misconstrued. In fact, Huperzine A was first isolated in 1980 at the Zhejiang Academy of Medical Sciences and the Shanghai Institute of Materia Medica of the Chinese Academy of Sciences. It is the whole herb that has centuries of traditional use.

The correction that was later printed in your April issue was intended to clarify that clinical studies on Huperzine A have been conducted using only the standardized form of purified Huperzine A, not an extract of the crude herb. This may be true, but the correction goes on to say "The crude extract has been tested to demonstrate considerable toxicity." As this herb has been used successfully in China for centuries without toxicity, this statement is puzzling

at best. We asked around to get to the root of this problem. Researchers in China assert that toxicity in this herb is extremely low. We asked Dr. James Duke, who commented, "It is my usual belief that on average, the whole herb is proportionately less toxic than the isolated silver bullet. Huperzine A is apparently a silver bullet..." We asked Dr. Alan Kozikowski, a noted Hup A researcher who was the first to artificially synthesize Hup A in the lab, and who also asserts that the whole herb is toxic, for some evidence based on scientific toxicity studies. He told us only that the evidence was printed in the Merck Manual under the names of the individual constituents. In accord with Dr. Duke's comment, many individual constituents from a vast majority of medicinal herbs do indeed have listed toxicities in their isolated form, including purified Huperzine A. Does this mean that most widely used whole medicinal herbs are toxic in recommended dosages? Certainly not.

We also did a search on Medline, which revealed only an article discussing the hepatotoxicity of a product called Jin Bu Huan Anodyne Tablets. *Huperzia serrata* has sometimes been called Jin Bu Huan in China... along with 47 other herbs. The hepatotoxicity reported actually comes from a patent medicine consisting primarily of L-tetrahydropalmatine, a pain reliever isolated from *Stephania simica*. In fact, every investigation we have made into the toxicity of *Huperzia*, both in China and in the United States, has revealed nothing, only the vague unsubstantiated reports such as the one that surfaced in your correction.

Consumers and manufacturers should be aware that most herbs have at least some degree of toxicity. Herbs should be used with respect and at recommended dosages. But toxicity often increases as the herb's constituents are concentrated or removed from their finely balanced natural proportions. My suspicion is that the primary reason that erroneous reports of *Huperzia* toxicity are surfacing may have more to do with vested interests in the purified product. The fact is that the balanced whole herb can also be standardized to a percentage of Huperzine A that is ample for therapeutic dosage, at less than a tenth of the cost of the isolated compound.

Sincerely,

Matt Humphrey, Marketing Director ❖

## Hot Herbs

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