Proper Use of Herba Ephedrae

The United States and some European countries have recently tightened up the regulation on products containing ephedra. The main reason is that products containing ephedra have been abused or used for reduction of weight in the absence of adequate regulation or professional guidance. The prolonged or excessive use of ephedra can lead to serious illnesses like heart problems and strokes.

2. Ephedrine is an vital ingredient of ephedra. According to the Pharmacopoeia of the People’s Republic of China, ephedra contains no less than 0.8% of total alkaloids, calculated as ephedrine (C\textsubscript{10}H\textsubscript{15}NO). In Western medicine, the recommended dosage of ephedrine is 45 mg- 180 mg of ephedrine hydrochloride per day as antitussives and anti-asthmatics, etc., but prolonged use is not recommended. In Chinese medicine, the use of ephedra has a long history. According to the Pharmacopoeia of the People’s Republic of China, ephedra is the dried herbaceous stem of Ephedra sinica Stapf, Ephedra intermedia Schrenk et C.A. Mey. or Ephedra equisetina Bge.. Its actions include inducing perspiration for dispelling cold, relieving asthma and causing diuresis. The indications of herba ephedrae include common cold with wind-cold syndrome; edema in acute nephritis; bronchial asthma. The suggested dosage is 2-9 g.

3. In Hong Kong, all products containing ephedrine and other Western drug ingredients must be registered as pharmaceutical products in accordance with the Pharmacy and Poisons Ordinance, and regulated as poisons. They can only be sold by authorized sellers of poisons. For Chinese medicine preparations containing ephedra, they must be registered as proprietary Chinese medicines (pCm) in accordance with Chinese Medicine Ordinance.

4. Due to the long experience in the use and prescription of herba ephedrae, Chinese Medicine Council of Hong Kong, after detailed discussion, adopted recommendation of the Chinese Medicines Board that it is not necessary to prohibit the reasonable use of herba ephedrae. However, Chinese medicines traders should comply with the following guidelines in manufacturing or selling pCm products containing ephedra.

- Chinese medicines preparations containing herba ephedrae must be considered as pCm preparations;
- Herba ephedrae should be used under the guidance of Chinese
medicine practitioners, with proper prescriptions, and in accordance with the proposed dosage of the pharmacopoeia;

- Since prolonged use of ephedra may cause irreversible damage to human body, herba ephedrae should not be used for a long time in general. If a relevant pCm claims that it is suitable for prolonged use, the reports of acute and long-term toxicity must be provided to prove its safety when seeking registration;

- All registered pCm containing herba ephedrae must attach a note in their labels indicating that the medicines are suitable for short-term use, e.g. “This product is not suitable for long-term use or this product should be used in accordance with doctor’s instructions”, or similar wordings, to ensure safety.

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