NEUROLOGICAL STAMP

Pierre Joseph Pelletier (1788–1842) and Jean Bienaime Caventou (1795–1887)

The French chemist Pelletier’s major work was the investigation of drugs, which he began in 1809. Later he worked with the pharmacist and organic chemist Caventou. Their collaborative studies, which began in 1817, included the isolation of strychnine from nux vomica (1818), caffeine (1821), and quinine from cinchona bark (1820). It was not until 1936 that Wolff reported on the effectiveness of quinine in relieving myotonia. Later, in 1955, Geschwind and Simpson noted the “quinine-like” action of procainamide on repetitive firing of cardiac muscle and suggested that it might be effective in combating myotonia.

Caventou, an expert in toxicology (Professor of Toxicology at the Ecole de Pharmacie (1835–1860)), also reported on cases of arsenical poisoning. Philatelically both were honoured by France in 1970 to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the discovery of quinine (Stanley Gibbons 1870, Scott 1268). Pelletier and Caventou are regarded as the founders of alkaloid chemistry. Caventou’s early successes were not repeated in later life. After Pelletier’s death in 1842 Caventou published nothing further.

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