NEUROLOGICAL STAMP

Hyoscyamus niger (henbane)

Henbane belongs to the solanaceae family. The narcotic alkaloids hyoscyamine, scopolamine, and atropine are derived from this foul smelling weed.

Its name is derived from the Anglo-Saxon Henn (chicken) and Bana (murderer) because when fowls eat the seeds of this plant, they become paralysed and die. The seeds are also poisonous to children, rodents, pigs, and fish. It was a traditional ingredient of witches' brew. All parts of the plant are poisonous and, if eaten, even small amounts cause anything from dizziness to delirium along with other anticholinergic effects. To the Elizabethan herbalist, John Gerard, henbane poisoning seemed akin to alcohol poisoning in that both caused stupor followed by comatose sleep. An Anglo-Saxon text gives the advice "in case a man is not able to sleep, take henbane seed and juice of garden mint, shake them together and smear the head therewith; it will be well with it."

Its flower is pictured with a grinder and pestle and mortar as part of a commemorative set of stamps issued by Czechoslovakia in 1971 for the International Congress of Pharmacology held in Prague. (Stanley Gibbons 1984, Scott 1777).

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