



A deadly poison that epitomises the homeopathic principle, writes *Keith Souter*

Aconite is one of our oldest remedies, having been one of the substances approved by Samuel Hahnemann and described in the first volume of his landmark text, the *Materia Medica Pura*. The homeopathic remedy is prepared from the whole fresh plant as it comes into flower. Hahnemann saw it as being a short-acting remedy that was very valuable in acute inflammatory and sometimes life-threatening conditions. James Tyler Kent also took this view and said that it is “a short-acting remedy. Its symptoms do not last long... There are no chronic diseases following it.” Since then many homeopathic texts have boldly stated that it is only an acute remedy. Well, I believe that it is indeed a great acute remedy, but it may also have a

place in chronic cases, when patients have sustained, and never recovered from a major shock. Essentially, I would describe it as a great acute remedy, but also as a “blocked shock” remedy.

### A distinctly shady and poisonous plant

*Aconitum napellus* is a member of the buttercup family, Ranunculaceae. This very important family of plants also gives us the remedies *Cimicifuga*, *Helleborus*, *Hydrastis*, *Paeonia*, *Pulsatilla*, *Ranunculus* and *Staphysagria*.

The plant grows in damp and shady areas, to a height of about three or four feet. It has a spindle-shaped root that has a superficial resemblance to the root of the horseradish. The stem grows straight with glossy, dark green leaves which are deeply cleft in a palmate manner. The clusters of dark blue flowers with purple sepals give it some of its common names – monkshood, friar’s cap, mourning bride and auld wife’s hood. Impressive though the hood-like flowers are, there is something vaguely sinister about them, as if they mask or hood a deadly secret. That secret, quite simply, is that it is Britain’s most poisonous plant. Death hovers about it.

There are in the region of 100 species of *aconitum*, which grow in shady mountainous grassland or scrub in the northern hemisphere. Another species, *Aconitum lycotonum* also has an extremely shady reputation. This is the plant known as wolfsbane, which was in days gone by used to kill wolves by baiting meat with it. It was also associated in folk legends with werewolves and lycanthropy.

Aconite, or aconitine the poisonous alkaloid derived from it, has been known since antiquity. Indeed, Pliny the Elder recounts that it takes its name from *Aconae*, in the Black Sea, its supposed place of origin. Legend says that this was the place where Hercules dragged Cerebus, the three-headed dog that guarded Hades. As the dog drooled during the fight, poison fell on the plant that grew there, tainting it and making it poisonous forever. The specific part of its name, *napellus*, means little turnip, indicating the shape of its root.

Another legend tells of how the sorceress Hecate taught her daughters Circe and Medea how to prepare and use aconite as a poison, and that Medea, who married King Aegeus used it when she attempted to poison Theseus, the king’s son. But Aegeus discovered the plot and saved Theseus.

On the island of Ceos draughts of the poison were given to “senile persons of no value to the state”. In addition, it was used as an arrow poison in warfare, and in conjunction with belladonna is believed to have been used as the fabled “flying ointment” in witchcraft practices, undoubtedly because of the hallucinogenic (and extremely dangerous) effects it would have.

Sadly, the literature records accidental deaths after pieces of the root have been eaten in mistake for horse-radish.

### The epitome of the homeopathic principle

Like many other poisons, for example arsenic, strychnine and prussic acid, aconite found a place in medical practice. It was introduced as a medicinal herb in 1763 in Vienna. In 1788 it was added to the London Pharmacopoeia and to the first US Pharmacopoeia in 1820. However, because the therapeutic dose is so close to the toxic dose, it was later deleted from both pharmacopoeias.

The interesting thing to note here is that although these compounds were known to be poisonous, empirical observation revealed that some aspects of their range of action could be beneficial. So before going further, let us just consider the known effects of aconite poisoning.

One of the first things that is experienced in aconite poisoning is tingling and numbness of the tongue and mouth and a sensation of ants crawling over the body. The body temperature begins to drop and the individual starts to feel cold and clammy. The pulse rate drops at first, but then may become irregular. With increasing toxicity, nausea and vomiting with epigastric pain begin, the breathing becomes laboured and the pupils dilate to cause blurring of vision. It also seems to have a predilection for the trigeminal nerve, the main motor nerve to the face, with resulting facial paralysis. Anxiety and great fear are liable to occur as a sense of suffocation and collapse supervene. Death can occur in a few hours.

In the past when fevers from all sorts of causes were common, it was inevitable that any agent that reduced a fever would be explored. And so it was with aconite. In addition, because it was capable of reducing the pulse rate it was also used to slow the heart rate down in various conditions. The old medical texts give instructions to give the remedy one drop at a time every quarter of an hour

for one hour, then repeating the dose once an hour for a further six hours until the fever was reduced. Clearly, it was a very risky medication to use.

In the 1880s this strange phenomenon about the possible therapeutic benefits of small doses of poisons was investigated by Rudolf Arndt and Hugo Schultz, two professors at the University of Greifswald in Germany. Their research, formulated as the Arndt-Schultz Law showed that weak stimuli stimulate living systems; moderate stimuli interfere with living systems, and strong stimuli inhibit or destroy living systems. Nowadays this hypothesis is recognised in pharmacology and toxicology as “hormesis”, a dose-response phenomenon characterised by a low dose stimulation and high dose inhibition. A toxin or poison showing hormesis thus has the opposite effect in small doses than in large doses. Fascinatingly, homeopathy seems to reflect an extrapolation of this principle, in that whereas low doses are beneficial to a living system, infinitesimal, homeopathically prepared remedies are potentially curative of various states affecting the living system.

### Give frequently in acute conditions

To get the benefit from Aconite in acute conditions it should be given frequently, as often as every five to fifteen minutes according to the emergency. If it is correctly chosen its effects will be quickly apparent. I would always tend to use the higher potency of 30c in these circumstances. In chronic “blocked shock”, which I shall discuss later, a single extremely high potency can have an amazing effect.

### Sudden onset, post-exposure

In acute conditions the picture comes on suddenly with great intensity. An infection will develop rapidly after exposure to a wind, a fright or a shock. Classically it is indicated in the very early congested phase of an illness before localisation has taken place. The condition can be extremely violent and even life-threatening.

Note this point about being post-exposure, because this is invariably the case. Conditions requiring Aconite seem to have a definite cause or to be a reaction from an event. That can be from sudden chilling, or after an accident or shock. The patient is liable to be aware that the problem started from that precise point.

The text books suggest that it is more commonly indicated in robust, thick-set



Photo courtesy of Stan Sheps

plethoric types. This may be the case, but it is the reaction that is the main guiding principle.

### Tension and fear of death

Tension is one of the main features that indicates the need for Aconite. This takes the form of mental and physical tension. Mental tension manifests as anxiety and fear. Indeed so great may that fear be that the individual actually feels that death may be imminent, and they have a presentiment about precisely when they are actually going to die. And they will be terrified at the prospect.

Panic can be so intense that they feel they need medicine straight away, that something needs doing instantly and that medical aid must be obtained as an emergency. Their feeling is that if aid is not obtained, they will die. This is the shadow of death that seems to hover around this state and links up with the deadly poison that in homeopathic dosage will relieve it.

At the physical level the tension can take the form of severe muscle pains, extreme restlessness, shaking and even convulsions. Tension in the involuntary muscles may produce chest pains, or in the respiratory system to provoke an attack of asthma.

### Hypersensitivity

When Aconite is needed there is hypersensitivity all round. Pain, touch, hearing and smell all tend to be affected. Pains are intolerable, to the point that the person screams with agony and demands that someone do something about it. They are often accompanied by numb feelings somewhere or by pins and needles. Touch seems to aggravate and they even feel discomfort from the weight of their bedclothes. The least



*After an accident Aconite can have excellent results*

noise, even their favourite music “runs through them”, or “makes them sad” and has to be switched off. And smells become unpleasant.

### **Burning fever and thirst**

From the days of Hippocrates until relatively recent years, clinicians studied different fever patterns and were adept at making deductions about the type of illness that caused the fever. The type of fever which indicates that Aconite may be needed is worth noting. Constantin Hering, one of the most famous pioneers of homeopathy, described it thus: “Heat, with thirst; hard, full and frequent pulse, anxious impatience, inappetible, beside himself, tossing about with agony.” To this you add the rider that it usually

follows a chill, and that it is invariably accompanied by great thirst. All these point the picture of Aconite.

Common cold, conjunctivitis or sudden, unbearable earache that comes on suddenly after a chill is suggestive of the need for Aconite. So too is vertigo and dizziness that comes after a shock. And facial pain or trigeminal neuralgia that comes after great shock and which is

provoked by the wind may well respond to Aconite. And here we also need to consider toothache starting after exposure to cold or to wind.

Stomach problems that begin with tingling in the lips and mouth, with bitter taste and great thirst are suggestive of the need for Aconite. Tummy pains tend to be cutting and burning. The sufferer will be restless, turning from side to side and unable to get comfort. And when diarrhoea begins, the typical “summer diarrhoea”, after exposure of some sort, possibly after a chill or even too much sun, then Aconite may cut it short.

Clarke described Aconite as “the best friend of the nursery”, since it is the main remedy for childhood croup. Kent said that it was the “remedy of the rosy, chubby, plethoric baby”. But one should always be mindful that young children can become ill very rapidly, so should not be deprived of a medical opinion.

### **Young women and mothers-to-be**

If a young woman suddenly stops having periods after a shock or fright, especially if she becomes fearful about them and her health, then Aconite may start them again.

Labour is hard for all mothers, but if the patient fears that she will actually die, then homeopathic Aconite may give rapid ease. And after delivery, if there is urinary retention with cutting pain, great restlessness and fear, Aconite may produce a flow.

### **Blocked shock**

I mentioned at the beginning that Aconite is usually considered to be an acute remedy, but sometimes chronic (even life-long) psychological problems which start after a severe shock, be that an accident, a major event like a tsunami, earthquake or personal threat, will respond to single very high potency Aconite. Insomnia, where the individual may fear going to sleep lest they die in their sleep, is suggestive of Aconite. So too, panic disorders, agitated depression and many of the phobias, especially where fears of death are prominent, may be markedly eased, if not cured, with this wonderful remedy, which seems to epitomise the homeopathic principle so well.



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