
LETTER to the EDITOR

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***Ecballium Elaterium* for Gastrointestinal Cancer**

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Dear Editor

I read with great interest the article by Jafargholizadeh et al., (2016) for the possible cytotoxic effects of *Ecballium elaterium* (L.) A. Richard fruit on gastric cancer cells due to its cucurbitacins. Although this toxic herb has been known since antiquity and was mentioned by ancient writers (as Hippocrates, Theophrastus Pliny, Dioscorides, Avicenna and others), Hippocrates was the first who suggested the administration of *Ecballium elaterium* for the management of gastrointestinal cancer. Particularly, in the *Book of Epidemics II*, Hippocrates of Kos (c. 460 - c. 370 BC) wrote the following: “*Ἀπό γαστρὸς ταραχῆς ἢ ἀπό βηχὸς καρκίνου γινομένου, τὸ στόμα πικραίνεται· δίδοναι δέ πίνειν ἐλατήριον δὶς ἢ τρίς, ἢν μὴ ψιλὸς ᾖ*” (If you develop cancer after a digestive disorder or a cough, your mouth becomes bitter. The patient is given elaterium two or three times, unless the patient is thin) (6,22). The administration of elaterium in this text was probably related to its laxative properties. It is worth mentioning that the name *Ecballium elaterium* originates from the Greek words “*ἐκβάλλω*” (ekvállō) which means discharge and “*ἐλατήριον*” (elatírion) which means spring, because of a specific characteristic of the seeds of the plant, which are ejected like springs, even by the lightest touch of the surface of the fruit, when it is ripe.

References

- Jafargholizadeh N, Zargar SJ, Yassa N, Tavakoli S (2016). Purification of cucurbitacins D, E, and I from *Ecballium elaterium* (L.) A. Rich fruits and study of their cytotoxic effects on the AGS cell line. *Asian Pac J Cancer Prev*, **17**, 4631-35.
- Hippocrates (1993). *Epidemics II*, 6,22. In: Complete works 13 [in Greek], Athens (Greece): Kaktos Publications, pp 165.

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