

History of Arsenic as a Poison and Medicinal

Michael F. Hughes

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Office of Research and Development, National
Health and Environmental Effects Research Laboratory,
Research Triangle Park, NC 27711

Abstract

Since ancient times, human exposure to the metalloid arsenic has been both intentional and unintentional. The intentional exposure to arsenic has been to inflict harm on others as well as to be a curative agent for those who are ill. The unintentional exposure has either been from the environment (e.g., drinking water) or from consumer products that either contained arsenic as a known constituent (e.g., wallpaper) or precursors used to make the product were unknowingly contaminated with arsenic (e.g., brewery sugar). Efforts are underway by public health officials in many countries to minimize unintentional environmental exposure. However, arsenic exposure will continue because of its pervasive nature in the environment, its use in commercial products (e.g., semiconductors), the malicious intent of some individuals to commit homicide, and its use as a medicinal agent.

Introduction

Arsenic is one of the most enigmatic elements known to humankind. For many centuries arsenic has been used as an intentional human poison, for which it has generated much fear and interest. However, over this same time frame, arsenic has been