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Editorial

Irrational combinations: No consideration for patient safety: Shiv Prakash

Review Article

Bioequivalence: Issues and perspectives: Shubha Rani

Research Papers

Isolation, characterization and study of enhancing effects on nasal absorption of insulin in rat of the total saponin from Acanthophyllum squarrosum: S.A. Sajadi Tabassi, H. Hosseinzadeh, M. Ramezani, E. Moghimipour, S.A. Mohajeri

Pharmacological and biochemical evidence for the antidepressant effect of the herbal preparation Trans-01: Md. Shalam, S.M. Shantakumar, M. Laxmi Narasu

Effects of dexamethasone and betamethasone as COX-2 gene expression inhibitors on rigidity in a rat model of Parkinson’s disease: Mehdi Shaﬁee Ardestani, Hassan Mehrab, Nourallah Sadeghzadeh

Activity of aqueous ethanol extract of Euphorbia prostrata ait on Shigella dysenteriae type 1-induced diarrhea in rats: Kamgang René, Gonsu Kamga Hortense, Wafo Pascal, Mbungni N. Jean Alexis, Pouokam Ervice Vidal, Fokam Tagne Michel Archange, Fonkoua Marie Christine

Antidiarrheal and antimicrobial activities of Stachytarpheta jamaicensis leaves: S. Sasidharan, L. Yoga Latha, Z. Zuraini, S. Suryani, S. Sangetha, L. Shirley

Research Letters

Positive inotropic and chronotropic effect of aloe gel on isolated rat heart: Pradeep Kumar, Manish Goyal, Sunita Tewari

Synergistic effect of cefixime and cloxacillin combination against common bacterial pathogens causing community acquired pneumonia: Astha Agarwal, N. Jain, A. Jain

In vitro cytotoxic and human recombinant caspase inhibitory effect of Annona reticulata leaves: Susanta Kumar Mondal, Nirup Bikash Mondal, Upal Kanti Mazumder

Correspondence

Counterfeit and substandard drugs: The need for an effective and stringent regulatory control in India and other developing countries: A. Sukhlecha

Letter to the Editor

Postgraduate education in medical pharmacology: A student’s viewpoint: Varun Gupta

Book Review

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I have read with interest ‘Counterfeit and substandard quality of drugs: The need for an effective and stringent regulatory control in India and other developing countries’. There are several technologies that may prove helpful in combating this problem. One such technique is radio-frequency identification (RFID) that uses electronic devices to track and identify items, such as pharmaceutical products, by assigning individual serial numbers to the containers holding each product. The FDA is working towards developing an electronic pedigree (E-Pedigree) system to track drugs from factory to pharmacy. This technology may prevent the diversion of drugs or counterfeiting by allowing wholesalers and pharmacists to determine the identity and dosage of individual products.

Another such product, the ICODE UID-OTP, features an NXP-programmed Unique Identifier (UID), guaranteeing the RFID tag. It is unique and has a one-time programmable memory that locks the user data after being programmed. The product also supports a destroy command, allowing the RFID tag to be permanently disabled when the customer picks up his or her prescription from the pharmacy, ensuring privacy. A new technique, Raman spectroscopy, can be used to discover counterfeit drugs while they are still inside their packaging. Scientists at the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have adapted a low-tech device to test and detect counterfeit drugs. They reported their results (on a method to test antimalarial drugs) at the 50th annual meeting of the American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene in Atlanta. The device, called a handheld Refractometer, has been used to measure the specific gravity of urine specimens. By measuring specific gravity of certain dissolved drugs, it was possible to determine the amount of the active ingredient in a tablet. The device could be used as a first line of defense against counterfeits.

In light of the increasing severity of the problem of counterfeit drugs, the World Health Organization has established a Rapid Alert System (RAS), the world’s first web-based system for tracking the activities of drug cheats. The Organization of Pharmaceutical Producers of India (OPPI) has recommended that the passage of the bill number LIV of May 2005 (to amend the Drugs and Cosmetics Act 2005), that seeks to enhance the punishment for counterfeiting of drugs and to make it a nonbailable offence, should be accelerated.

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