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ANESTHESIOLOGY REFLECTIONS FROM THE WOOD LIBRARY-MUSEUM

From Kraits to Crates: How Asia Shared Snake Oil with America



As with the salmon, the black-banded sea krait, also known as the Chinese sea snake or Japanese erabu, is high in omega-3 fatty acids, which do not harden in cold waters. Chinese rail workers in the 1860s and levee workers in the 1870s helped introduce snake oil liniments to the American West. Public interest in snake oil peaked in 1893 after a self-styled "Rattlesnake King" peddled his liniment at the World's Columbian Exposition. Before crowds of fairgoers, Clark Stanley (born c. 1854) slit open live rattlers, boiled them, and at least pretended to skim off the surfacing oils to add to his "Clark Stanley's Snake Oil Liniment." Although the label on Stanley's corked amber bottle (left) noted that it "Contains no Opium, Morphine, Chloroform, Ammonia, Ether or Alcohol," chemists examining the liniment in 1917 found that Clark's liniment crates contained no rattlesnakes and that his bottles contained no oil from snakes. (Copyright © the American Society of Anesthesiologists' Wood Library-Museum of Anesthesiology.)

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