NATURAL-BASED REPELLENT PRODUCTS: EFFICACY FOR MILITARY AND GENERAL PUBLIC USES

ROBERT J. NOVAK AND EUGENE J. GERBERG

INTRODUCTION

The first use of repellents as a means to avoid the bites of noxious mosquitoes and other biting arthropods was probably done by prehistoric man when they found that sitting next to a smoke- or flame-generated fire tended to provide a degree of protection. This method is still used in many places by remote peoples and at times by modern man when camping out in natural areas. Today, even the most effective insect- or mosquito-abatement programs cannot totally eliminate the nuisances caused by these blood-seeking arthropods (Novak and Lamman 2001). Therefore it is necessary at times to employ personal protection to help avoid insect bites. There are a wide variety of methods that people can employ to help avoid noxious insects by establishing a mechanical barrier, like bed-nets, screened windows, and clothing. In the U.S.A., and to a large degree in Europe and Japan, the primary barriers are hermetically sealed and air-conditioned houses. Although clothing can be used to help avoid unwanted insect bites, such as loose fitting long-sleeved shirts and pants, the public tends to expose as much skin as possible during the hot, humid summer months, when these insects are at their highest densities. Clothing can, in fact, be a very practical and efficient way to avoid these pests.

The objectives of this article are to define and discuss differences between natural or herbal-based repellents with synthetic chemical-based repellents. In addition, we will discuss how to determine the efficacy of repellent activity using cage- and field-testing protocols. We will also present a brief discussion of those repellent methods that do not work, especially those that have recently inundated the market place.

BRIEF HISTORY OF REPELLENTS

Prior to World War II, a number of plant products, generally oils and other substances derived from specific plant species, were the mainstay repellents, applied to either skin or clothing to avoid biting arthropods. The first methods man used to repel insects was with smoke, covering the skin with mud, or by applying a variety of animal fats and greases. Native Americans rubbed cedar tree needles or used the fat from bear to prevent the nuisances caused by insects. Some wore various herbs and poultices around their necks or on their clothing. The first written records of repellents against insects occur in classical Roman literature by Pliny, the naturalist, and by Dioscorides (40–90 AD), a Greek physician who described how wormwood (Artemisia absinthium) could repel gnats and fleas.

Oils extracted from plants or plant parts with a variety of volatile compounds (Tables 1 and 2) that repelled insects were the principal means that people used for protecting themselves or their domestic animals prior to World War I, which was the advent of synthetic chemical repellents. Oil of citronella was one of the most widely used early repellents, being introduced around 1882. It was registered in the USA as Mckessons Oil of Citronella and was used for human application to repel both mosquitoes and gnats. Other essential oils that were used during this time were anise, bay laurel, bergamot, cassia, cedar wood, eucalyptus, and wintergreen.

In 1929, dimethyl phthalate, one of the first synthetic repellents, was reported to be effective against house and stable flies. Grannett (1940) was instrumental in developing ethyl hexandiol, also known as Rutgers 612. Grannett also developed reproducible methods to evaluate and test repellent compounds. In 1937, indalone, dimethyl carbonate was synthesized at Rutgers University and reported to be an effective repellent.

During World War II, it became necessary to develop effective and long-lasting insect repellents, primarily mosquito repellents, to help military troops avoid those biting insects that transmit pathogens causing debilitating diseases such as malaria, dengue, and typhus. Just prior to World War II, the U.S. Department of Agriculture established a laboratory at Orlando, FL, which tested thousands of potential repellent compounds. During the war, the standard military repellent was 622. This repellent contained 6 parts dimethyl phthalate and 2 parts each of ethyl hexandiol and indalone. After World War II, the standard military repellent applied to the skin of soldiers was called M-2020, which was a mixture of 40% dimethyl phthalate, 30% ethyl hexandiol, and 30% dimethyl carbonate. The standard repellent applied to clothing was M-1960, a mixture of 30% benzyl benzoate, 30% n-butylacetanilide, 30% 2-butyl-1,2-ethyl-1,3propanediol, and 10% TWEEN 80.

Diethyltoluamide (DEET), developed by McCabe in 1954, is one of the very best mosquito repellents developed (Rutledge et al. 1996, Elston 1998) for mosquito control. It has been the gold standard for public health threats and emergencies as well as for use in military operations. During the recent outbreak of West Nile virus in the USA, DEET is the repellent of choice and has been part
Table 1. A brief list of natural or herbal products, by name, what they are derived from, the active ingredient or ingredients, and insects for which it has been shown to have repellent activity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Derived from</th>
<th>Active ingredient</th>
<th>Species</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Citronella oil</td>
<td>Cymbopogon (grass)</td>
<td>Terpenes, alcohols, aldehydes</td>
<td>Biting flies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geraniol coeur</td>
<td>Geraniol</td>
<td>Geraniol, nerol, citronellol</td>
<td>Biting flies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quwenling</td>
<td>Lemon eucalyptus</td>
<td>p-Methane-3, 8-diol</td>
<td>Mosquitos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neem</td>
<td>Neem tree</td>
<td>Many compounds</td>
<td>Biting flies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soy bean oil</td>
<td>Soy bean plant</td>
<td>Lecithin base, many compounds</td>
<td>Biting flies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thujic acid</td>
<td>Western cedar</td>
<td>Diethylamide</td>
<td>Aeges aegypti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tarweed extract</td>
<td>Hemizonia sp.</td>
<td>1, 8-Cineole (eucalyptol)</td>
<td>Ae. aegypti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palmarosa oil</td>
<td>Cymbopogon martinii</td>
<td>Many compounds</td>
<td>Anopheles sp.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

of the standard recommendation for general public use by the Centers for Disease Control and numerous state public health departments. Military forces or public health workers exposed to vector-borne diseases must have the means to protect themselves for long periods of time. In addition, insect pest populations may exist in such large numbers that they may interfere with military operations, requiring a long-lasting and durable repellent.

Military operations and public health emergencies normally do not occur in backyards of suburban or at other outdoor recreational areas, where shorter duration and less harsh repellents may be satisfactory. In recent years, there has been a tendency toward the use of natural agents or phytochemicals (Tables 1 and 2). Some of the so-called natural products, or, better described, herbal products are listed in Table 2. Those compounds that have shown specific repellency to insects are briefly described in Table 1.

A complete list of phytochemicals and essential oils reported to have repellent activity toward vectors and other arthropods is beyond the scope of this review. The list (Table 2) contains chemicals that have been reported in the literature as repellents, although, in some cases, their efficacy is unsupported (e.g., the use of Vitamin B1). We have made no attempt to rate their effectiveness based in general, natural products are considerably less effective than synthetic repellents, like DEET, at equivalent concentrations. Several chemicals and essential oils do provide relatively short periods of mosquito repellency (Rutledge and Gupta 1996).

There are several newly formulated repellents that have recently come to the market and may illustrate the future trend in repellent research. Merck Company has shown that 3-(N-butylacetamin)-propionate, called Merck 3535, has strong repellent action against biting flies and mosquitoes (Marchio 1996). KBR 3023, a Bayer product, which is a piperidene derivative (piperidinecarboxylic acid, 2-(2-hydroxyethyl)1-methylpyrolyester), is also very effective in repelling biting flies and mosquitoes. A compound called PMD is similar to quwenling, but is derived by a novel extraction process. The active ingredient is p-methane-3, 8-diol combined with isopulegol and citronella. PMD has been shown to provide 5 h complete protection when tested against Anopheles funestus and Anopheles gambiense. Though permethrin, a pyrethroid, is not technically a repellent, it is used in a manner similar to repellents. Permethrins are used to impregnate military uniforms, clothing, and bed nets.

AGENTS: NATURAL VERSUS CHEMICAL

With the advent of more natural-product repellents, it is important to define the specific nature of the repellent action. First, many potential natural repellents can be considered a barrier to the insect, preventing either landing or penetration of the skin. In many cases, these barrier compounds can be skin lotions or sun screens. However, it is important that these barrier repellents are field tested with the same rigor as volatile repellents in order to establish product efficacy. Volatile compounds rely on vapor pressure and temperature to release specific chemicals that insects avoid. In fact, the operating definition of a volatile repellent is that its "efficacy of a repellent product is based upon the vaporous stage of the repellent to prevent bites." In other words, a minimum vapor pressure is required to
maintain the efficacy of a repellent. Most repellent products on the market today use various delivery mechanisms that either control the evaporation rate of a repellent for long-term repellency or as the carrier agent disintegrates it releases repellent vapors to prevent bites. This is a highly desirable characteristic of most current and future repellent active ingredients. Based on the operating definition, one of the key differences between these 2 types of repellents is the experimental design critical to establish efficacy. With barrier repellents, an insect may land but not be able to bite. This change in behavioral capability must be noted in the experimental design because a land has a different meaning when testing a volatile-based repellent.

One of the other important differences between chemical- and natural product-based repellents is the duration of repelling activity. This question has been somewhat resolved by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) by setting a 2-h minimum activity requirement of a repellent in order to gain registration. It is well established that several formulations of DEET can give up to 6 h complete protection. To date, there is no natural product that can give that duration of control. However, due to potential human-safety factors, it is recommended that DEET-containing products not be reapplied after the first application. Also, it is not recommended that DEET be combined with skin lotions or sun screens because these products are generally reapplied by the user. This is the big difference between DEET and natural products, which can be reapplied safely, thus compensating for the shorter duration of repellent activity.

The number of insects biting plays a major role in not only testing a repellent but in the marketing of a product. Most marketing commercials tend to use the extremes in terms of insect population numbers. In fact, in most of these advertisements, the insect numbers greatly exceed what the typical lay person would ever encounter or would remain in those circumstances. The recommendation of the EPA’s Scientific Advisory Panel (SAP) for biting pressures appropriate for testing should be based primarily on what the general public perceives as a nuisance problem. Because little information is available in the literature, experience of members of the SAP coupled with a publication by Morris and Clanton (1988) titled "Quantification of a nuisance mosquito problem in Florida" were used as guidelines. It is important to remember that repellents are used almost wholly for nuisance problems, not disease problems. Therefore, it follows that the guidelines used regarding biting pressure reflect conditions that impact the general public and not military or public health personnel. Based on these parameters, the SAP recommended the following biting rates for field testing insects and thus establishing minimum nuisance thresholds of: mosquitoes 1 bite per min; ceratopogonids at 1 bite per 5 min; tabanids at 1 bite per 5 min.

When a natural product- or herbal-based repel-

Determination of Efficacy

Cage studies

In regard to the utility of cage studies to test repellent efficacy, the findings of the EPA SAP should be followed. The SAP strongly recommends that only field studies should be used to establish efficacy and registration. Cage studies are not a valid substitute for repellent field studies. Cage tests should be used only as a screening device and should not be submitted in support of a registration. They should, however, be used by the manufacturer to screen possible repellents, develop formulations, and determine a range of application rates. The Klun and Debboun (2000) device may be an alternative to the device specified in the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) standard for laboratory studies of mosquito-borne diseases (ASTM 2000: 951-94), remembering that it is still a screening tool that was never intended as a substitute for field studies. However, if a test cage with an enclosed area, such as Klun and Debboun (2000), that does
not provide for free flow of repellent vapors from the surface and eventual dissipation of repellent vapors into the immediate environment, it is probable that some repellents may have erroneously indicated higher repellency. Any laboratory test cage selected for product testing should take vaporous state of repellents into account before being recommended for use.

**Application amounts (dosage)**

The amount of repellent to be applied to the skin should be determined by the registrant or manufacturer. There are several reasons that justify this statement. The amount applied is determined by weight, which makes it very difficult to determine application rates of aerosols. Therefore, because most repellents are liquids, creams, or aerosols, the application rates should be in milliliters or in seconds of spray time for aerosols. Also, the test area for application of 600 cm$^2$ is too large an area for many arms. A test area of 250-300 cm$^2$ is more than appropriate.

The amount of the repellent to be tested should be determined by the registrant. This could be determined by scientifically conducting statistically valid studies that demonstrate the quantity of a given physical formulation consumers are likely to apply. Apparently, some of these data already exist in the cosmetic industry. Where they do not exist, repellent manufacturers should conduct them. EPA could, and probably should, serve as a repository for this information. The dose rate per unit could then be established through pre-field tests using cage tests. The rationale for this is that there are and, in the future, will be numerous new products that do not fit the synthetic chemical repellent mode of action. We are already seeing this with the number of natural repellents and many new products that have multiple purposes, i.e., sun screen, moisturizers, etc. This would certainly play a major role in determining the application amount. The EPA could then use field-efficacy data for registration and labeling.

**Field studies**

The current resurgence for natural- or herbal-based repellents has caused a re-examination of how repellents should be tested in order to establish efficacy and future U.S. EPA registration. Several key issues will be discussed regarding field testing, including: 1) cage versus field studies, 2) establishing biting frequency, 3) experimental design, and 4) need for a Good Laboratory Practice (GLP) field protocol. The following discussion will be based in part using information from the U.S. EPA’s Scientific Advisor Panel on repellents.

**Cage versus field studies**

The authors, as well as the SAP, strongly recommended that only field studies should be used to establish efficacy and registration. Cage studies are not a valid substitute for repellent field studies. Cage tests should be used only as a screening device and should not be submitted in support of a registration. They should, however, be used by the manufacturer to screen possible repellents, develop formulations, and determine a range of application rates. The Klun and Debboun device may be an alternative to the device specified in the ASTM standard for laboratory studies of mosquitoes (ASTM 2000; 951-94), remembering that it is still a screening tool that was never intended as a substitute for mosquito field studies. It is very important to remember that any laboratory test cage selected for product testing should take into account the vapor state of repellents before use.

**Biting frequency**

The primary goal for testing any product is to employ good science to assure validity of the results. The purpose for testing the performance of repellents is to establish a product’s capability of preventing pest arthropods from generally annoying, puncturing the skin, or taking a blood meal from humans. Historically, the EPA has used the first confirmed bite test to assess the effectiveness of human insect repellents. However, the concern of the EPA and the scientific community is that the first confirmed bite method will result in the loss of valuable data. The first confirmed bite method does not appear to have been developed using a statistically valid approach, whereas alternative methods, such as first bite or a 95% reduction, provide a statistically valid real-world assessment of insect-repellent efficacy. The 95% reduction in bites requires a study design that allows comparisons between a control and treatment. This requires that a control be used each time a new treatment (or set of treatments) is studied. This would provide for a statistically generated testing protocol, which would also give EPA standardize statistically analyzed data for comparing both skin-applied and barrier repellents. It would also take into account variations in test subjects, location, and product dose, and/or formulations. Moreover, in a short period of time, EPA would have a comprehensive database on numerous natural and chemical repellents, which could certainly aid in the registration process. The null hypothesis would also be standard for all products and, of course, based on 95% biting inhibition. This type of testing design would also eliminate the controversy about complete protection time (CPT), first confirmed bite (FCB) because 95% reduction would be the standard. Also, the question concerning the need for a GLP protocol would become a mute point because the experimental design would dictate the parameters of the test. CPT for repellents would then be reduced to a defined period of time to include 2 h. Two hours should be the standard minimum time required for
repellent activity. Employing the 95% reduction in biting within the scope of the experimental design would certainly provide a statistically sound protocol to test synthetic repellents as well as those derived from natural or herbal-based products.

**Experimental design**

One of the major problems with field studies revolves around sample size or the number of human test subjects required for a statistically valid test. It is essential that sample size is based on the scientific experimental design and not on formula-driven guidelines. Gupta and Rutledge (1999) point out that there are inherent flaws in the determination of sample size. For example, in reality, according to Rutledge and Gupta (1999), for 5 individuals, the confidence of protection is 97.5% for 1 h but, at 2 h, it is only about 50%. Additionally, using protection periods of 1-8 h with confidence limits of 99% and 95%, the best possible results ($P < 0.01$ with $D < 0.5$ h) for a product claiming 1 h of protection would require 15 test subjects and one claiming 8 h would require 280 individuals. This is not feasible or practical. Using the 99% reduction in bite protocol, fairly standard experimental design with associated variability information, and target confidence necessary, sample sizes should be quite easy to compute. In contrast, this would not be the case if the first bite or the first confirmed bite protocols were used.

In any experimental design, it is the case that the number of replicates of product(s) is of greater importance than the number of subjects. The principal issue is ensuring tests are replicated a sufficient number of times to strengthen their statistical power. For example, if you test 4 repellent concentrations, you should use 5 people [4 treatments + 1 control] per replicate. You would repeat the test at least 5 times by rotating the treatments/control among the 5 participants. However, it is important to recognize that there are a number of perfectly adequate experimental designs to evaluate repellents. It was recommended by the SAP that, rather than dictate a single inflexible protocol, it may make more sense to convene an expert panel to evaluate proposed testing protocols. This panel of experts could evaluate proposed protocols, proposed statistical analyses, and provide protocol(s) acceptable to the EPA for field testing repellents.

**GLP field protocol**

The EPA should not require GLP standards for field trials. GLP was designed for laboratory studies. The L in GLP = laboratory. If the EPA adopts a scientifically based experimental design for field-efficacy studies, the standards for laboratory studies under GLP would be not be necessary. The GLP standards, as currently used for field studies, do not add anything to the science and quality of the test except additional costs.

**SUMMARY**

The major points addressed in this article regarding natural- or herbal-based repellents are as follows. 1) It is important to recognize the end user when developing and testing repellents. There is a major difference between repellents suitable for nuisance management by the general public as compared with military or public health uses when battle-field conditions or a disease risk is present. 2) The experimental design used to determine repellent efficacy must also recognize the end user. Pest densities should reflect real-world conditions as much as possible. 3) The experimental design should be directed to the pest population, not at a different product. Remember, we should use scientific logic, not market-driven tactics. 4) There is a need for specific regulatory standards for natural repellents to insure not only quality but the proper and most effective means of application and use. 5) There is a need for increased research and development for natural and synthetic repellents.

**REFERENCES CITED**

ASTM. 2000. E 939-94. Standard method of field testing topical applications of compounds as repellents for medically important and pest arthropods (including insects, ticks, and mites): I Mosquitoes.


