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Contents

	Pág.
Message of the Presidents	37-39
Committees	41-42
<i>Opening Conference</i>	
Education and Health Promotion P. CANTISTA	43-47
Scientific Sessions	
<i>ISMH Session-01. Balneology in Rheumatic Conditions</i>	
Ambulatory Balneological Treatment for Rheumatic Diseases; an Effective Option? MZ. KARAGÜLLE	48-49
Methods of hydro-balneotherapy in rheumatology: current issues N. BADALOV	50
Long-term efficacy of spa therapy in patients with rheumatoid arthritis M. KARAGÜLLE, S. KARDES, MZ. KARAGULLE	51
 <i>Bol Soc Esp Hidrol Méd</i> 2018, Vol. 33, Supl. 1, 19-34	 19

Contents

The effects of the calcium-magnesium-bicarbonate content in thermal mineral water on chronic low back pain: a randomized, controlled follow-up study IK. TEFNER, T. GÁTI, L. KOVÁCS, K. HODOSI, T. BENDER	52
Spa therapy in rheumatoid arthritis: a crossover trial S. KARDES, M. KARAGÜLLE, MZ. KARAGULLE	53
The effect of balneotherapy on sleep, clinical symptoms, serum ghrelin and leptin levels in fibromyalgia: A randomized controlled single blind study SS. KARABULUT, F. KARAARSLAN, A. DÖNMEZ, H. GÜRDAL, MZ. KARAGULLE, N. ERDOGAN,	54
Lombatherm study news of an international randomized trial on low back pain R. FORESTIER, N. MOLINARI, FB. EROL FORESTIER, A. FRANÇON	55-56
Crenobalneo therapy in spondylarthropathy, a systematic review R. FORESTIER, A. BUGNARD, A. FRANÇON, FB. EROL FORESTIER, T. THOMAS	57-58
Crenobalneo therapy in fibromyalgia, a systematic review R. FORESTIER, A. DONMEZ, FB. EROL FORESTIER, A. FRANÇON, N. ERDOGAN	59-60
Balneotherapy in knee osteoarthritis: a cost/effectiveness analysis alongside an italian randomized controlled clinical trial A. FIORAVANTI, O. CIANI, S. CHELESCHI, S. TENTI	61-62
Can balneotherapy represent a useful option for fibromyalgia syndrome? Results from a double blind randomized clinical trial A. FIORAVANTI, P. MANICA, S. CHELESCHI, S. TENTI	63-64
The effectiveness comparison of same balneotherapy applications with different frequency within different time periods in patients with fibromyalgia; a randomized controlled single blind study R. EROKSÜZ, A. DONMEZ, F. KARAARSLAN, B. BERKÓZ, H. ISSEVER, N. ERDOGAN, MZ. KARAGULLE	65-66
ISMH Session -02. Immunologic Aspects & Mechanisms Immunological aspects of balneology T. BENDER	67
Sulphur balneotherapy and patient's immunity: H ₂ S effects on human CD4+ T cell polarization to Th17 and Treg phenotype M. VITALE	68-69
An approach to studying clinical efficacy and immunological parameters in crenotherapy for respiratory disease in Portugal L. TABORDA-BARATA	70-71
Is iron separation acceptable for natural mineral waters used to treat rheumatic conditions? The opinion of the National Academy of Medicine. CF. ROQUES, R. TRÈVES, D. BONTOUX, COMMITTEE N° XII, NATIONAL ACADEMY OF MEDICINE, PARIS, FRANCE	72

Contents

Spotting the bad science R. FORESTIER	73-74
Mud-bath therapy regulates the expression levels of microRNA in osteoarthritis. Epigenetic contribution to explain the mechanism of action of Balneotherapy. S. CHELESCHI, A. DE PALMA, S. TENTI, N. GIORDANO, A. FIORAVANTI	75-76
ISMH Session - 03. Thermal Agents effects	
Background features of accidental drowning in bath S. INOKUMA	77
Salts on the skin JM. CARBAJO	78-79
Prevention of meteopathy in patients with arterial hypertension: a pilot comparative randomized study N. BADALOV, A. MUKHINA, M. SMIRNOVA, I. BARINOVA, Z. BLANKOVA, O. SVIRIDA, I. BORODULINA, N. AGEEVA, F. AGEEV	80-81
The benefits of dry carbon dioxide bath in peripheral arterial disease J. FEHER	82
Radon measurements for the planned thermal bath complex in Chunqing (Ba'nan) region, China K. NAGY, A. CSORDAS, T. KOVACS	83
Transcutaneous carbon dioxide therapy improves the bioavailability of nitric oxide N. BALÁZS	84
Effects of sulfur bath on hip osteoarthritis C. KOVÁKCS	85
The impact of humus water on inflammatory cytokines of endothelial cells cultured under conditions of hyperglycemia K. SZOT, K. GÓRALCZYK, M. MAŁGORZATA, N. VERYHO, J. CHOJNOWSKI, I. PONIKOWSKA, D. ROŚĆ	86-87
Potential role of hydrogen sulfide in osteoarthritis C. MAGRO, R. HENRIQUES, T. MIRCO, F. SAMPAIO	88-89
Administration of intra-articular hydrogen sulphide reduces the severity of osteoarthritis in vivo EF. BURGUERA, A. VELA-ANERO, T. HERMIDA-GOMEZ, P. FILGUEIRA FERNANDEZ, L. GATO-CALVO, C. VAAMONDE, FJ. BLANCO, R. MEIJIDE FAILDE	90-91
Hydrogen sulphide synthesis is impaired in osteoarthritic chondrocytes from diabetic patients and in vitro in cells exposed to high glucose stress C. VAAMONDE, EF. BURGUERA, FJ. BLANCO, R. MEIJIDE FAILDE	92-93
Hyperthermic baths (HTB) in patients with moderate depression J. NAUMANN	94-95
<i>Bol Soc Esp Hidrol Méd</i> 2018, Vol. 33, Supl. 1, 19-34	21

Contents

Prevention and Therapy of Type 2 Diabetes-What Is the Potential of Daily Water Intake and Its Mineral Nutrients? J. NAUMANN, D. BIEHLER, T. LÜTY, C. SADAGHIANI	96
Changes in Plasma L-Arginine/ADMA Ratio Levels... in Patients with Generalized Osteoarthritis Receiving Spa Cure Treatment in Bolu PRM Hospital. Non-randomized controlled study F. KARAARSLAN, K. OZKUK, SS. KARABULUT, S. BEKPINAR, MZ. KARAGULLE, N. ERDOGAN,	97-98
Conference The natural mineral water aquifer of Amarante JÁ. SIMÕES CORTEZ, V. COSTA PINTO MACHADO	99
ISMH Session 04. Health education (special participation of the " Société Française de Médecine Thermale ")	
Therapeutic Patient Education (TPE) and health education in spa centers in France A. FRANÇON, R. FORESTIER, K. DUBOURG	100-101
The AFRETH Experience of Prevention and Education in French Spas Resorts CF. ROQUES, CE. BOUVIER, RC MANCRET	102
Training of the personnel of a spa center to provide a therapeutic education program K. DUBOURG	103
Therapeutic Education in rheumatology : example of both programs "Fibromyalgia" and "Osteoarthritis" set up in the spa center of Dax (France) K. DUBOURG	104
The Spa Resort, an ideal place for patient education. Examples in Venous and Lymphatic disorders" P. CARPENTIER, A. FRANÇON	105-106
Psychoeducational Protocol for benzodiazepines Withdrawal in Spa Center O. DUBOIS, T. HERGUETA, A. DIALLO, R. SALAMON, C. VAUGEUIS, P. DE MARICOURT, A. GALINOWSKI	107-108
Lifestyle Medicine and Thermal Medicine MA. FERNÁNDEZ-TORÁN, I. CANIZARES	109
Patient education and rehabilitation after hip arthroplasty in thermal environmental S. MASIERO	110-111
Special ISMH / ESPA scientific committee session Quality and innovation: a new European Thermal Survey T. DUBOIS, J. PINTO-BARBOSA	112-113
Hot and cold – The long lasting impact of enlightenment health care and politics on Balneology S. HORN	114

Contents

ISMH Session - 05. Peloids

- The Effectiveness of Peloidotherapy and Aquatic Exercise in Knee Osteoarthritis Treatment; A Randomized Controlled Single Blind Study 115
S. OZKURT, A. DONMEZ, I. TAKA, N. ERDOGAN, MZ KARAGULLE, H ISSEVER
- The benefit of mud therapy in association with Hialuronic Acid (HA) in hip osteoarthritis 116
S. DEMIRGIAN, V. MARIN, A. LULEA, AI. LASCU, F. STERGHUIS
- Physical study of Hévíz peat 117-118
F. ARMIJO, JM. CARBAJO, JM. EJEDA, F. MARAVER
- Physical study of two peat of Puhovichi (Belarus) 119-120
F. ARMIJO, I. CORVILLO, JM. EJEDA, I. VAZQUEZ, JM. CARBAJO, F. MARAVER
- Efficacy of peloidotherapy alone or in combination with hydrotherapy in osteoarthritis 121
T. ADIGÜZEL, A. KUZU, B. ARSLA, G. HATICE, MZ. KARAGULLE
- Effects of local mud pack and saline bath therapy in hand osteoarthritis; randomized single-blind study 122-123
MF. SATAK MZ. KARAGULLE
- Efficacy of balneotherapy, peloidotherapy and group exercises in the management of Ankylosing Spondylitis 124-125
ZD. TAKINACI, MZ. KARAGULLE, M. KARAGULLE

ISMH Sesión-06. Rehabilitation

- SPA therapy together with supervised self-mobilization improves pain, function and quality of life in patients with chronic shoulder pain: a single blind randomized controlled trial 126-127
CF. ROQUES, I. CHARY-VALCKENAERE, JN. TAMISIER, M. BOULANGÉ
- Aquatic exercise in Osteoporosis: does it works? 128-129
P. CANTISTA. M. CANTISTA
- Multiple sclerosis and aquatic therapy. A systematic review 130
I. CORVILLO, C. MORER, E. VARELA, F. ARMIJO, A. ALVAREZ-BADILLO, O. ARMIJO, F. MARAVER
- Hydrogalvanic bath therapy in the treatment of patients with lumbosacral radiculopathy 131-132
I. BORODULINA, N. BADALOV, A. MUKHINA, T. MARFINA
- Retrospective study about rehabilitation after lumber disk surgery in patients hospitalized during year 2016 in Balneal and Rehabilitation Sanatorium of Techirghiol 133
V. MARIN, S. DERNIRGIAN, F. STERGHIU, A. LULEA, AI. LASCU
- Special neurosurgical indication of low level laser therapy 134
C. OLÁH, N. KOSZTOPULOSZ
- Underwater traction balneotherapy cabin development 135
C. OLÁH, T. BORBÉLY, Z. KISS

Contents

Portuguese Authority Health Role at Hydrotherapy Establishment M. MESQUITA, L. SANTOS	136
The efficacy of balneotherapy in patients with chronic shoulder pain K. OZKUK	137
ISMH Sesión-07. Balneological procedures	
New Combined Balneological Procedures I. PONIKOWZKA, T. LATOUR, N. VERYHO	138
Medical Hydrology Journals F. MARAVER, C. MORER	139
FEMTEC –ISMH An "old" collaboration for a modern concept of balneology applied to health and well being U. SOLIMENE	140-142
The mental and physical efficacy regarding a full body immersion using a day visit hot spring and self-stretching in bath tab continuously G. YASUAKI	143
A Survey of Geo-medical Resources in Nigeria K. NGHARGBU	144
The Economics of Geomedical Resources K. NGHARGBU, R. NGHARGBU	145
The results of thermal treatment of foot and calves chronic ulcers in patients with diabetes and vascular diseases J. CHOJNOWSKI, N. VERYHO, I. PONIKOWZKA	146-147
A new look at the treatment of women's diseases in health resorts with the use of latest technologies and natural resources J. ZEGARSKA, J. CHOJNOWSKI	148
Study quality of life after drinking cure of humus water in patients with alcohol dependence N. VERYHO, M. ZIÓLKOWSK, D. CZARNIECKI, M. KŁOPOCKA, A. LIEBERT, KJ.SZOT, J. CHOJNOWSKI, I. PONIKOWZKA	149-150
Health Applications of Naturally Aged Medicinal Mud L. VELA, A. CHAVERO, V. CHOQUE CERDA, C. ZUGARRAMURDI, F. GARCÍA, N. GURNIK, G. PETTINARI, E. ROCA, C. SORIA, A. GIAVENO, M. BASCHINI	151-152
The effect of balneotherapy on the nutritional status and lipid status parameters of the obese persons – pilot study A. JOKIC, A. TODIC, S. MARKOVIC, D. ANTONIC	153
Techirghiol Balneal and Rehabilitation Sanatorium – one year study on patients' profile O. SURDU, S. DEMIRGIAN, D. PROFIR, TV. SURDU	154

Contents

Sustainable Balneo Tourism Development in Romania - evaluation and strategic tasks C. MUNTEANU, G. DOGARU	155-156
<i>SEHM Session-01. Thalassotherapy</i>	
Animal Organic compounds in thalassotherapy, micro and macroorganisms from the sea in human health A. CERRADA, N. TEJERA	157-161
Health promotion and prevention weight loss program in a thalassotherapy center A. MUELA	162
Thalassotherapy C. MORER	163
The role of mineral elements and other chemical compounds used in balneology: data from double-blind randomized clinical trials C. MORER, CF. ROQUES, A. FRANÇON, R. FORESTIER, F. MARAVER	164-165
Study of the socio-demographic profile of the social thermalists at Cofrentes Spa. 2018 L. AGUILERA, M. BERTRAN, B. DE GREGORIO, V. DíEZ, MP. DOMINGUEZ, L. FERNÁNDEZ, S. LÓPEZ, A. PINEDO, M. SANTIBÁÑEZ, F. MARAVER	166
Current status Health Resort Medicine 2018 F. MARAVER, P. DIESTRO, MA. FERNANDEZ-TORAN, C. MORER, JM. CARBAJO, C. CUENCA, L. AGUILERA, AI. MARTIN-MEGIAS, I. VAZQUEZ, I. CORVILLO, F. ARMIJO, M. ROMERO, A. ALVAREZ-BADILLO,	167-168
<i>SEHM Session-02. Cancer Survivors</i>	
What can you offer in the oncology patient care process? S. RAMOS	169
Experience of thermal treatment programs in post-oncological patients L. VELA, A. CHAVERO	170-172
Cancer survivor. Benefits of thermal treatment P. DIESTRO	173
Balneotherapy in cancer survivors I. CORVILLO, F. ARMIJO, L. AGUILERA, AI. MARTIN-MEGIAS, F. MARAVER	174
Classification of medicinal mineral waters and natural mineral waters. Quality of Analysis F. ARMIJO, I. CORVILLO, I. VAZQUEZ, F. MARAVER	175-176
Organic micro-pollutants in natural mineral water and natural spring water I. VAZQUEZ, F. ARMIJO, I. CORVILLO, F. MARAVER	177-178
Efectos anti-catabólicos del sulfuro de hidrógeno en tejido articular artrósico EF. BURGUERA, A. VELA-ANERO, L. GATO, C. VAAMONDE, FJ. BLANCO, R. MEIJIDE FAILDE	179-180

Contents

Posters Session

- The influence of Balneo Factors of Banja Koviljaca on the functional status of lumbar-sacral Spine in patients with lumbar Discus Hernia 181
A. TODIĆ, S. MARKOVIĆ, A. JOKIĆ
- Effectiveness of Pelotherapy in carpal tunnel syndrome 182
BM. ÖKMEN, R. ERÖKSÜZ, MK. AKSOY, A. GÜNEŞ, L. ALTAN
- Health Promotion: From theory to practice in Termas de S. Jorge 183
P. PRATA, P. CANTISTA
- Comparative study of shock wave therapy and low level laser therapy effects in patients with myofascial pain syndrome of the trapezius 184
M. KIRÁLY, T. BENDER
- Physical, physicochemical and microbiological properties of peloids made with mineral-medicinal waters from the Malahá baths (Granada, Spain) 185
MV. FERNÁNDEZ-GONZÁLEZ, C. NARANJO, JM. MARTÍN-GARCÍA, A. MOLINERO, AI. DEL MORAL, JC. REINA, R. DELGADO
- Workshop to educate in the correct postural hygiene for the activities of daily life 186
MD. FERNÁNDEZ-MARCOS
- Evidence for the therapeutic effectiveness of organic content in medical waters. Double blind study in Szigetvár spa, Hungary 187
A. HANZEL, K. HORVÁTH, C. VARGA
- Protocol for a prospective, randomised, double-blind, placebo-controlled study to assess the clinical efficacy of crenotherapy with sulfurous thermal waters in patients with chronic rhinitis / rhinosinuitis 188-189
A. ESTEVES, J. VIEGAS, R. PASTORINHO, O. LOURENCO, AM. FONSECA, EM. CARDOSO, L. GRANADEIRO, FA. AROSA, AJ. SANTOS SILVA, P. PADRÃO, A. SOUSA GOMES, L. TABORDA-BARATA
- Novel approach to assessing the effects of sulphurous thermal waters on an *in vitro* 3D nasal integrity model from allergic rhinitis patients 190-191
J. VIEGAS, A. ESTEVES, G. ALVES, EM. CARDOSO, FA. AROSA, AJ. SANTOS-SILVA, L. TABORDA-BARATA
- Dermatoses and crenotherapy: historie facts in termas do Cró 192-193
BR. FERREIRA, JF. SIMÕES, H. CASTRO
- Balneology: heading toward the future 194-195
HB. CASTRO, BR. FERREIRA, C. ALMEIDA SANTOS, E. SILVA, JF. SIMÕES, MA. GRILO, M. FAZENDEIRO, P. CANTISTA
- Emergencies and urgencies at Copahue Thermal Health 196-197
V. PINI, V. GARRIDO, Y. GATICA, V. CUEVAS, S. HUENTEN, E. PARADA, E. CONA, E. CERDA, A. ZUGARRAMURDI, F. GARCÍA, N. GURNIK, L. VELA

Contents

Benefits of Hydrotherapy in Parkinson's Disease S. AMARAL, P. CRUZ, AM. RIBEIRO, R. ARAÚJO, P. CANTISTA	198-199
Hydrotherapy in the rehabilitation process in burned patients: a literature review P. CRUZ, S. AMARAL, AM. RIBEIRO, M. RODRIGUES, P. CANTISTA	200-201
Treatment of respiratory pathology in Termas de Luso: renewal R. SOARES, B. MORENO, P. CANTISTA	202-203
Aquatic Exercise on Osteoporosis: Myths and Facts C. MARTINS MOREIRA, P. CANTISTA	204-205
Does balneotherapy a good solution to treat fibromyalgia?: a review of the literature N. ALBURQUERQUE, J. HENRIQUES, M. JOANA, J. SILVA	206-207
Continuation of a thalassotherapy program in a hydrotherapy center, new strategies and holistic approach A. CERRADA	208-211
Evolutionary characterization of São Jorge Thermal Spa from 2009 to 2015 J. CUNHA, AM. RIBEIRO, P. CANTISTA	212
Mid-term Report of Amarante Thermal Baths AJ. SANTOS-SILVA, J. CARVALHO-MACEDO, S. MORGADO	213

Long-term efficacy of spa therapy in patients with rheumatoid arthritis

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Our previous crossover randomized trial suggested that spa therapy added to usual pharmacotherapy provides benefits that lasted 6 months over pharmacotherapy alone in rheumatoid arthritis patients. We now extend, and report the long-term results of that study. In the crossover trial, patients were randomized to spa therapy first group or control first group (first assignment, period 1, 6 months); after this period and washout phase (9 months), they crossed over to the other arm (second assignment, period 2, 6 months). In this long-term study, we now analyze the 15-month results of the first assignment, and 12-month results of the second assignment in the opposite side with a 6-month extension of the follow-up period. The clinical outcome measures were pain, patient and physician global assessment, Health Assessment Questionnaire, and Disease Activity Score-28. The 15-month results of first assignment revealed no statistically significant differences between the groups in any of the efficacy outcomes ($p > 0.05$ for all). The 12-month results for the second assignment after crossover revealed a statistically significant decrease between the groups regarding the patient global assessment scores ($p = 0.016$), physician global assessment scores ($p = 0.003$) and swollen joints counts ($p = 0.030$); however, no statistically significant difference was found between the groups in any of the other efficacy outcomes ($p > 0.05$ for all). The short- and medium-term beneficial effects of the 2-week spa therapy added to the usual pharmacotherapy observed through the initial 6-month evaluation period may be maintained mildly to moderately to the 12-month mark in rheumatoid arthritis patients receiving conventional disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs. Further studies with a larger sample size are needed for the confirmation of the study results.

Spa therapy in rheumatoid arthritis: a crossover trial

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Objective: This study aims to investigate whether 2-week spa therapy, as an adjunct to usual pharmacological therapy, has any beneficial effect in patients with rheumatoid arthritis (RA).

Methods: In this single-blind crossover study, 50 patients were randomly assigned in a 1:1 manner to receive usual pharmacological therapy plus 2-week spa therapy or usual pharmacological therapy alone (period 1.6 months); after a 9-month washout, patients were crossed over to the opposite assignment (period 2.6 months). Spa therapy program included a daily saline balneotherapy session at 36–37 °C for 20 min except Sundays. The clinical outcomes were evaluated at baseline, after spa therapy (2 weeks) and 3 and 6 months after the spa therapy in both period and were pain (Visual Analogue Scale (VAS)), patient and physician global assessments (VAS), Health Assessment Questionnaire (HAQ), and Disease Activity Score (DAS28).

Results: Spa therapy was superior to control therapy in improving all the assessed clinical outcomes at the end of the spa therapy. This superiority persisted significantly in physician global assessment ($p = 0.010$) and with a trend in favor of spa group in patient global assessment ($p = 0.058$), function ($p = 0.092$), and disease activity ($p = 0.098$) at 3 months. Statistically significant improvements were found in spa therapy compared to control in disease activity ($p = 0.006$) and patient ($p = 0.020$) and physician global ($p = 0.011$) assessments, and a trend toward improvements in pain ($p = 0.069$) and swollen joints ($p = 0.070$) at 6 months.

Conclusion: A 2-week spa therapy adjunct to usual pharmacological therapy provided beneficial clinical effects compared to usual pharmacological therapy alone, in RA patients treated with traditional disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs. These beneficial effects lasted for 6 months.