

Letter from . . . Chicago

Hidden dangers everywhere

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As *Homo sapiens (americanus)* relaxes in his dreamhouse overlooking the lake or the mountains, he may find his equanimity shattered by happenings of the most unwelcome kind. Gases may bubble up through the floor of his house from a long forgotten chemical dump; acid vapours drifting in from thousands of miles away may fall on his garden and dissolve his flowers and dogs; or his whole town may suddenly become flooded and contaminated with dioxin. Should he want to escape to an Alhambra like hotel with fountains and rivulets in the lobby, an elegantly suspended ramp may fall, crashing unexpectedly on his precious cranium. If the thought of all of this should give him a headache the consequences of taking even one extra strength Tylenol (paracetamol) could be even more catastrophic. Then there always remains the possibility of a new mysterious ailment, if not legionnaire's disease then acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, a poorly understood condition that has already killed more than 300 people, afflicting homosexuals, heroin addicts, Haitians, haemophiliacs, hepatitis-marked heterosexuals, helper T-lymphocytes, and other "aitches" yet to be discovered.

Then swarms of bees could suddenly descend on his apartment complex, as happened recently in New Jersey, causing great commotion among the screaming people, some of whom had to be taken to hospital after being stung over 100 times. Or deadly mosquitos could hatch in the rain water, stinging thousands of birds and killing dozens of horses, and giving equine encephalitis to several people. Perhaps the day of reckoning for these mosquitos will come from *Toxorhynchites ambionensis*, a ruthless killer of other mosquitos and their larvae, who feeds on nectar rather than on blood and does not bite man but who unfortunately cannot survive the cold northern winters.

Even at breakfast the news is not encouraging. Sweets are bad, as everybody knows, but artificial sweeteners are worse. Starch blockers are useless, now illegal, and do not prevent the digestion of starch. Coffee has been claimed to cause cancer of the pancreas; and decaffeinated coffee, with its methylene chloride used to extract the caffeine, causes mice to suffer from cancer if given in doses equivalent to 12 million cups of coffee a day. You should avoid salt cured, salt pickled, and smoked meats, as well as cut down the fat intake by 25%, reports the National Research Council, citing "increasingly impressive" evidence of an association between fats and cancer. Not that the suggestion to eat less meat, fat, and dairy products pleased the Meat Board—indeed it resulted in a temporary decline in meat prices last year as well as "causing great concern in the agricultural community." Nor were MacDonald's delighted when 68 people throughout the country developed haemorrhagic colitis from eating undercooked hamburgers, and indeed the value of their shares declined temporarily even though this sporadic illness,

caused perhaps by a mutant strain of *Escherichia coli*, is generally self limiting. There remains also the ever present danger of a meat bolus getting stuck in the throat and causing asphyxia, the so called café coronary, said to afflict 6.6 people per 100 000, especially the aged, the debilitated, the parkinsonian, the alcoholic, the wearers of false dentures, and the eaters of tough meat.

By now our modern *Homo sapiens* has wisely decided to eat at home, despite the dioxin and the gas bubbling up through the dining room floor. For he has recently read that people in restaurants may get burnt by flaming drinks and desserts, especially by cherry jubilee, and also by steak flambé and beef brochette. Face flambé, the name of the new syndrome, may even require skin grafting; and we read in the St George's Day issue of last year's *JAMA* that some fire departments have regulated the chefs by limiting the amount of fluid to 30 ml and the height of the flame to 20 cm, requiring a special permit for serving flaming dishes, and calling for special pouring devices and for wet towels in the preparation area. None of these rules apply to the local Greek restaurants, where the flames regularly singe the ceiling during the serving of the traditional saganaki. But meanwhile another danger has been reported for the gourmet who likes swallowing live minnows instead of using them for fishing bait, a fad reminiscent of an earlier craze of gulping live goldfish. It seems that the minnows harbour a fish roundworm that bores its way out of the gut, may grow to a length of 30 cm, and has recently caused peritonitis in three people who had swallowed the live fish in a tavern while drinking beer, two of whom required laparotomy.

Safety in the womb

And so, with dioxin in the water, steak in his throat, and roundworms in his tummy, our modern man might almost be forgiven if he should long, at least subconsciously, for the safety he once enjoyed in the womb. Yet life could be dangerous in utero, especially during organogenesis, because too many ultrasound examinations are ordered on flimsy grounds and the obstetricians worry about possibly long term effects on the fetus. Furthermore, if baby is to do well mummy has been advised not to smoke, not to take valium or aspirin, and not to engage in sexual intercourse. She must not drink alcohol, because this cuts off the fetus's oxygen supply and causes permanent brain damage, as shown on five monkeys in a study that reportedly "overwhelmed" the investigators. She should also not shoot heroin, because baby may be born with withdrawal symptoms, insomnia, irritability, convulsions, a screeching cry, and may need months of treatment in an infant drug addiction centre. Nor can marijuana be recommended, because supplies in four states were contaminated with salmonella, the germs spreading by hand to mouth contact, and even the babies of pot smoking parents coming down with fever, vomiting, and diarrhoea.

Even in his cot our baby sapiens is far from being safe. Rattles, made of metal bells enclosed in wooden cages, may get

caught in his throat (? a nursery coronary), and two firms recently agreed to recall 64 000 baby rattles that did not conform to the specifications of the Consumer Product Safety Commission. Day care units in several communities were recently called hotbeds of intestinal infection reminiscent of the seventeenth century presanitation days, with children having a 25% chance of getting diarrhoea within five weeks, and many also being infected with hepatitis because of poor hygiene. Then some believe that aspirin taken for a cold causes Reye's syndrome, and last September, under heavy pressure from Mr Ralph Nader's group, former health secretary Richard Schweiker announced that he would require warning labels on aspirin bottles and launched a massive education and advertising programme against the use of aspirin in children—for such is the power of consumer groups. And there is also the danger of lead poisoning in children, leading the government to order a 30% reduction in the amount of lead in gasoline by 1990; the danger of rollerboards, which cause a whole variety of injuries and broken bones; and the very real danger of children dying in car accidents, subject of a continuous debate about the advisability of safety belts and other protective devices, the installation of which is now under dispute in the Supreme Court.

Meanwhile the Surgeon General has warned that video games are hazardous to children's health because they become addicted to the machines "body and soul." There is nothing constructive in these games, he said, and aberrations in behaviour as well as sleeplessness and nightmares may result from continuing efforts to keep the Martians from landing and trying to kill off as many as possible. Disputing these conclusions, the manufacturers of video games found "no evidence of a cause and effect relationship," presumably arguing that the more Martians killed the safer this planet will be. But now even the popular portable radios with earphones are deemed dangerous, being able to cause permanent sensorineural hearing loss if used too long at a volume setting above four—though remaining justly popular with attending physicians who dislike making rounds to the sound of blaring television programmes and do not object to being ignored by patients tuned in to their favourite soap opera. Then there are the parents and teachers of the "I am Somebody Society" who claim that designer tags on clothes—such as Izod crocodiles and Pollo horses—may damage children's sense of self worth by making them elitist or giving them inferiority complexes.

Hazards of sport

Among hazardous sports we find hanging upside down by the heels to ease back pain, a practice reported to cause red spots around the eyes from ruptured blood vessels. A new complication of running is "jogging fever," attributed to the release of endogenous pyrogens and accompanied by leucocytosis and low iron and zinc blood concentrations. More blood thirsty and also illegal is dog fighting, and some 1000 dog fighters are secretly breeding and training pit bull terriers, giving them a "taste for blood" by having them kill smaller animals and then gambling while they fight each other and tear their opponents apart with their vice like jaws. So far the police has not been able to stamp out this brutal spectacle, and undercover agents are said to be in danger of being shot with automatic weapons on being recognised. There has also been renewed concern about the effects of boxing, recently brought to the fore by the fatal outcome in the fourteenth round world lightweight championship, when the challenger was hit 40 times "without significantly hitting back," so that he was left brain stem dead in what the newspapers called "slaughter, not sport." The issue was covered in great detail in a recent report indicating that some 15% of professional boxers develop dementia or overt neurological abnormalities, and that the sport ought to be regulated more strictly. Medical editorials went further, calling boxing an obscenity, a throwback to primitive man, and a deadly degrading sport that should be banned in a civilised society. But one news reporter pointed out that the Marquess of Queensberry

was civilising boxing when the doctors' forbears were still using leeches, and suggested that damage from punches to the head could be lessened by a return to bare knuckles, thus forcing fighters to ration their blows or damage their own hands. With gloves, however, blows to the head severe enough to result in unconsciousness cause contusions and haemorrhages at the base of the brain and also the tearing of nerve fibres. In the same vein, a *Wall Street Journal* editorial (24 November 1982) reminds us of yet another "silent epidemic," that of 450 000 head injuries a year, a major cause of disability, especially in the young. Despite a normal physical examination, brain damage may be shown by computed tomography, and the victims are often left with forgetfulness, fatigue, headaches, impaired eyesight, alterations in behaviour, and other residual symptoms that are erroneously attributed to psychosomatic disturbance or compensation neurosis.

Also in modern America, to paraphrase Kierkegaard, it is dangerous to go to the hospital and it is dangerous not to go. The former is exemplified by the tragedy of the healthy young woman who died from sepsis after a caesarian section in a suburban hospital after a sponge was left in the abdomen. Needless to say, the survivors have filed a suit for \$12m damages. The latter is shown by the story of a 5 year old girl with an abdominal tumour the size of a basketball who had lost so much weight that she looked like a little prisoner of war. The parents, members of an Indiana secretive fundamentalist religious cult, had forbidden the surgery but were overruled by local officials, who estimated that at least 25 people may have died from treatable illnesses as a result of the cult's literal interpretation of the Bible ("And the prayer of faith shall save the sick . . ." James V:15).

The final danger in hospitals comes from doctors who write in a script combining cuneiform, hieroglyphic, and ataxic tendencies, the end result often looking like a page from Ulphila's Bible turned upside down. As a result patients have received ear drops as enemas because to the nurse "ear" looked like "rear"; of six units of regular insulin being misread as 60 units; and of doctors not being able to decipher even their own writing. In one hospital some 16% of doctors had truly illegible writing and the writing of another 17% could barely be deciphered. The National Association of Writing Instrument Manufacturers estimates that illegible writing costs the American economy some \$100m a year, and recommended remedies include taking courses in calligraphy, using the italic style, and replacing ballpoints and felt tip pens with broad edge pens available in art stores.

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What advice should be given to patients taking antihypertensive drugs who regularly check their own blood pressure?

People with high blood pressure who take their own blood pressure regularly must be aware of blood pressure variability. We consider it important that they should understand the consequences of high blood pressure and the necessity for good control.¹ They must appreciate that high, or low, blood pressure readings must be viewed in the context of variable blood pressure behaviour. If self measurement of blood pressure shows a persistent rise the best advice is for that person to have a discussion with his or her doctor with a view to starting drug treatment if this has not already been done, or increasing or changing medication. If, on the other hand, the blood pressure remains persistently within the normal range it may be possible to reduce drug treatment. Occasionally it may be possible to stop drug treatment altogether, but in such cases life long surveillance will be necessary, as the blood pressure often rises again after a long period of normotension.—EOIN O'BRIEN, consultant physician (cardiology), Dublin.

¹ O'Malley K. *High blood pressure: what it means for you, and how to control it*. London: Martin Dunitz, 1982.