

Killers in the basement



A pale unshaven man with bleary eyes sits in a damp basement lit by a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling. He wears a long black coat that almost touches the floor and smokes without his hands ever touching his cigarette. A half empty syringe lies

on a small table, also several bottles and medicinal capsules. A black and white movie from the 'forties plays itself out on the television screen but the glassy eyes do not see it—for they are the eyes of a killer.

The next day the newspapers report that several people have died from cyanide poisoning after taking adulterated capsules—decongestant or analgesic as the case may be—for the man in the basement is merely generic, the imagined composite figure of the several crazed killers who during the past

decade have repeatedly struck out at their innocent victims. The most notorious episode occurred in 1982 in Chicago, when seven people died after taking paracetamol or acetoaminophen 'Tylenol' capsules laced with cyanide (see *BMJ* 1983;286:211). Although the culprit was never definitely identified, a prime suspect remains in federal prison convicted on an extortion charge for sending a letter to the drug company demanding \$1 million to stop the killings. It was the intense publicity surrounding this incident that led to the promulgation of strict federal regulations mandating seals and membranes to make drug containers tamper-proof.

Yet another incident occurred more recently, in 1991, when a 29 year old salesman bought a pound of cyanide under an alias and laced with it his wife's Sudafed (pseudoephedrine) decongestant capsules in order to collect \$700 000 in insurance money. His wife survived, but not so two other people whose capsules he also poisoned to divert suspicion from himself. It took the police some 18 months of intense detective work to track down the killer.

Commenting on this latest episode, the

Wall Street Journal noted that "product tampering has become a crime more common than many realize. As a rule authorities are not too eager to talk about it, for fear of inspiring copycat crimes. Yet in the past decade there have been some 650 cases of tampering not only with capsules but also with milk, soft drinks, and peanut butter. Such crimes are difficult to track down and often remain unsolved. They are also difficult to prevent, it being almost impossible to manufacture a completely tamperproof container. Despite all precautions, "any diabolical criminal who wants to make such poisoning possible still can."

Clearly the risk of cyanide poisoning is tiny compared with that of being killed in a car accident or by a stray bullet. Would the money spent on ever more elaborate precautions not be better used on promoting seat belts or stopping gang wars? Yet many people, to be on the safe side, would rather be taking tablets than capsules. For somewhere in a basement a pale man in a black coat may be getting ready to strike again.—(1000) DUNN, attending physician, Cook County Hospital, Chicago, USA.