

Letter from . . . Chicago

Trifles soothe the mind

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A young manicurist recently came to the hospital with a diastolic blood pressure of 170 mm Hg, renal failure, and fragmented red cells that clearly had taken a bad beating. Her haemorrhagic fundi contrasted vividly with her long and shiny sculptured nails, beautifully decorated with small jewels arranged in a variety of patterns. She had evidently lavished the utmost care on her nails while neglecting her chronically raised blood pressure. Her distorted priorities would have shocked the great Plutarch, who warned against misusing our innate love of inquiry and observation by expending it on objects unworthy of our attention: "He who busies himself in mean occupations produces, in the very pains he takes about things of little or no use, an evidence of his negligence and indisposition to what is really good."¹

Among philosophers the nature of this good has long been a subject of contention. Yet with the exception of a few miserable Egyptian soothsayers and mediaeval sorcerers, few have considered it to have much to do with people's nails. Which perhaps explains why even Dr William Bean saw fit to present the results of his 35 years of observing the growth of the nail of his left thumb by introducing his subject with some obliquity. By way of perhaps forestalling possible criticism, he points out that even the great Dr Samuel Johnson would sometimes amuse himself in trivial occupations—and, when not employed in exploring what Virginia Woolf called the "magnificent resources of his mind," would maintain "that there are moments which admit of being soothed only by trifles."² Not that such a disclaimer should have been necessary from someone who edited the *Archives of Internal Medicine* in its days of glory, when Drs Scarlett of Calgary and Aring of Cincinnati regularly lifted our minds into regions that even Plutarch would not have found inhospitable. So we might as well be reminded that nail growth is slowed by infection, especially measles, by coronary thrombosis, and by stroke (on the paralysed side), but is speeded up by nail biting; also that the nails of the middle fingers grow faster than the others; and that toe nails grow slower than finger nails. Nails grow faster in psoriasis, especially during the active phase, in children, in pregnancy, in warm climates, with hyperaemia, and perhaps with clubbing.²

Yet so vast is this subject that science has barely scratched its surface. Patients may present with white nails, spoon shaped nails, Plummer's nails, with the double paired white lines of hypoalbuminaemia, or the half and half nails of renal failure. These physical signs may be obscured, as with our lady manicurist, by the efforts of a multimillion industry of sculpturing nails, using plastic materials to convert them into artificial claws that can further be painted, decorated with decals, or studded with rhinestones or even tiny diamonds—a sign of femininity or wealth that may however cause a softening or disintegration of

the underlying natural nail. Some men let the nail of one of their little fingers grow longer than the other, to use it as a scoop for cocaine, to remove earwax, clean the other fingernails, repair watches, or let people know they do not have to work with their hands—at least in Brazil. But to return to Dr Bean, his nails first grew 0.123 mm daily and then slowed down to 0.95 mm at age 67, slowing down considerably during an attack of mumps. Nails do not grow after death, neither does the beard, and we note that the world record (up to 1978) for long nails stands at 56.25 cm; which may need conversion into more comprehensible units in a country that has been inching so slowly towards the metric system.

A decimal year

Yet almost 200 years ago Thomas Jefferson had first suggested introducing a decimal system of weights and measures. John Quincy Adams, Secretary of State, urged adoption of this "rare and sublime system" in 1918. In 1866 Congress passed the National Metric Act, allowing the use of metric measures by consenting adults. In 1879 the house of delegates of the American Medical Association resolved that its members use the metric system in its transactions, a stand reaffirmed in 1921. But outside medicine and science progress was slow. By 1970, according to the Commerce Department, the United States had become an island in a metric sea, along with Brunei, Burma, Liberia, and South Yemen. In 1975 Congress bowed to the times, passing a National Metric Act and creating the 17 member United States Metric Board to oversee and coordinate voluntary conversion plans. It was predicted that the changeover would have become complete by 1990.

But the board was endowed with no legal enforcing authority. Its members, appointed after two years' delay, first met in 1978 not quite sure as to what was their charge. By then the General Accounting Office had published a study questioning the benefits of conversion and suggesting that the cost would be too high. "Don't give up on metrics" wrote the *Chicago Tribune* at the time, comparing adherence to inches and feet to racial prejudice, an attitude that could be changed by education in the schools, especially as trade and travel were bound to bring the United States and the rest of the world closer together. And indeed, in the following years, some changes were effected. The soft drinks and wine bottles were converted first, then cars, computers, business machines, and the chemical industry. Some signs on the highways were changed to kilometres, and weather reports were issued in both Celsius and Fahrenheit. As the price of gasoline rose to over a dollar a gallon, the oil companies transiently recorded their sales in litres, this being cheaper than having to add an extra digit to the pump meters.

Further progress, however, was halted by intense consumer opposition, from housewives, from automobile drivers, and from traditionalists, some of whom saw the whole thing as a communist plot and even raised the spectre of a decimal year. "You wouldn't believe the hatred American people feel for the

metric system," wrote one columnist. "Why can't the rest of the world follow us" asked one housewife. Somebody asserted that "Americans are too stubborn to be tricked into metrics," asking why our children should have to wonder what it means to take with a grain of salt, to get a great deal of milage, or to claim one's pound of flesh. In New York partygoers paid \$36 to attend a gala metric resistance party on the principle that an ounce of prevention was better than a pound of cure. "I hear that the metre is based on a rod somewhere outside of Paris," said one of the guests. "Don't give an inch," said another. Women were particularly ill disposed to admit metric food and utensils into their kitchens. One survey indicated that most people had no concept of the size of a metre or a kilometre. Then came the present conservative administration, and last October the Metric Board expired suddenly by having its operating funds cut off. The current wisdom is that the "natural forces of the market place will set the tempo of the march to metric," that pounds and pints and inches will survive well into the next century, and that Americans will sit on the metric fence for some time to come.

Mediocre educational performance

Another commission, that for excellence in education, recently issued its final report, warning against a rising tide of mediocrity in the nation's schools. Noting a decline in students' performance in the basic subjects of English, maths, and science, it suggested that this nation was indulging in economic unilateral disarmament by tolerating mediocre educational performance. It warned in particular against allowing the curriculum to become so diluted by elective subjects, such as music and art, that the appetisers and desserts could become easily mistaken for the main course. For this state of affairs some critics blamed the regulatory policy of the federal government, the judges who had mandated bilingual education and like programmes that in the long run would harm the students, and the teachers' unions for tolerating mediocrity by protecting incompetent teachers. Others pointed out that teaching had become an underpaid and underesteemed profession suffering from an acute brain drain syndrome, especially since women now had so many other opportunities for work. It was also foreseen that a shortage of teachers would develop as repeated financial crises had resulted in layoffs of the youngest teachers, while some of the older ones were now reaching retirement age. One suggested solution was to pay teachers more, as well as lengthening the school day and year, introducing more discipline, and mandating stiffer graduating requirements. Also commenting on the report was President Reagan, who charged that there was a criminal waste of the intellectual potential of America's youth because the schools were not doing their job, even though they received more money per child than those in any other country in the world. The answer, suggested the President, was not more federal funds, but leadership from the headmasters, dedication from good teachers, discipline, homework, testing, efficient use of time, and rewarding excellence.

Human blood, spousal rape, and a full moon

Moving on to other news, we read that in Florida a fisherman caught a 165 kg shark and was surprised to find in its stomach a man's right leg, complete with sock and tennis shoe, but so far has not heard from the owner of the lost limb. At the University of Buffalo scientists have discovered that hangovers have a high survival value and that people who do not experience them are more likely to become alcoholics. In Idaho an allergist has concluded that Count Dracula, and also Attila the Hun, suffered from an allergic addition to high protein foods, including blood. He believes that this made them react at times in bizarre or greatly agitated manner, leading them to drink human blood and commit acts of cruelty and barbarism when deprived of the

protein they were allergic to. In Texas a man was sentenced to five years in prison for "stealing" an ulcer operation—posing as another person and having \$3200 worth of gastric surgery in his place. In Arizona a 53 year old man was found guilty of bigamy and fraud after he was found to have married more than 105 women in 33 years and to have separated them from a considerable portion of their assets. But in New York homosexuals are having a difficult time in getting the council to pass a gay rights Bill, despite their claim that the city's gay population amounts to one million. And all over the country fears of herpes infection seem to be quelling the sexual revolution, and many unmarried people have adopted a more conservative approach to sex. An estimated 5-20 million Americans are believed to have contracted the herpes virus. To this must be added a rising incidence of penicillin resistant gonorrhoea, and an increase in ectopic pregnancies because of pelvic inflammation from 17 800 to 42 400 between 1970 and 1978.

Meanwhile, a violent controversy continues on whether anthropologist Margaret Mead was misled when she wrote about the easy going sexual mores of the natives of Samoa. In Illinois, legislation has been introduced to recognise spousal rape, an act committed by "using force or the threat of force," as a criminal offence. And a divorce judge in Florida ruled that a woman who had worked to put her husband through medical school was entitled to receive 25% of his future earnings on the dissolution of the marriage. Finally, 14 years after man's first landing, the moon remains as mysterious as ever.³ Once considered to cure warts, freckles, and leprosy, it was also thought to cause a variety of conditions ranging from madness to blindness. Among the ancient Greeks, it was considered lucky to marry at full moon. In our time, full moon lunacy may cause people to be ill, fight, drink, have accidents, kill, or jump off buildings, perhaps because of the same magnetic forces that also control the tides. A full moon may affect the stock market. It may cause elephants to frolic at the zoo. But, contrary to prevailing opinion, wolves do not bay at the moon, whether it be full or not.³

References

- ¹ *Plutarch's lives*. (Translated by John Dryden and revised by Arthur Hugh Clough). *Pericles*. New York: The Modern Library, 182-5.
- ² Bean WB. Nail growth. *Arch Intern Med* 1980;140:73-6.
- ³ Loeb M. If the moon controls the tide, just think what it does to you. *Wall Street Journal* 1983 April 27.

Can the moderately enlarged adenoids in a 5 year old boy be responsible for nocturnal mouth breathing or snoring or both? Can this result in chronic sleep deprivation, producing daytime irritability, suboptimal performance at school, and impaired physical growth? If so is adenoidectomy the best treatment?

Moderately enlarged adenoids in a 5 year old may be responsible for nocturnal mouth breathing and snoring. The problem is to define moderate. A recent study has shown that the size of the adenoids cannot be predicted accurately from assessment of tonsil mass.¹ A soft tissue lateral x ray examination of the neck may be useful. Certainly in rare instances nasal obstruction by enlarged adenoids and tonsils causes "sleep apnoea" with daytime irritability, poor performance at school, and impaired growth. This can be assessed properly only by studying sleep behaviour and blood gas changes in a "sleep laboratory."² If these symptoms have been accurately attributed to enlarged adenoids adenoidectomy will relieve them, but in the sleep apnoea syndrome tonsillectomy may also be needed.²—H LUDMAN, consultant ENT surgeon, London.

¹ Stearn SM. The relationship of adenoid weight to tonsil weight. *J Laryngol* 1983;97:519-21.

² Lind MG, Lundell BPW. Tonsillar hyperplasia in children. *Arch Otolaryngol* 1982;108:650-4.