

Letter from Chicago: Perfume



A pig lives in an apartment on the street next to ours in the heart of downtown Chicago. Vietnamese by birth, it weighs 150 lb (68 kg), and its pot belly almost trails on the ground. Its adoring owners keep it as a pet, causing the neighbours to com-

plain to the police. But the judge said that there was nothing in the condominium rules against pigs living in the building. Its immigration papers were in order, the green card obtained legally and not through a bogus marriage.

Why should the neighbours object so much? Are they afraid of bumping into their new neighbour in the elevator or at the laundromat? Do they think he will bring down property prices and put off Japanese investors? But the pig is polite, house trained, practically noiseless and odourless.

Yet people could understandably be revulsed by the thought of a pig next door in a society that has banished all smells from man

or beast. For here the deodorant reigns supreme in creams and sprays and roll on bottles. Aluminium is still the main ingredient, but worry over Alzheimer's disease has spawned an interest in more "natural" deodorants. One highly recommended brand contains aloe, coriander, non-alcoholic witch hazel, vera gel, camomile tea, and xanthan gum—the latter reassuringly described as vegetable.

Americans may not be alone in their aversion to odours. Some Buddhists find smells so repugnant that they spend days purifying themselves with incense. In the Book of Esther the young virgins shortlisted to replace Queen Vashti underwent 12 months' purification: six months with oil of myrrh, six with sweet odours, but none with deodorants. Some human smells, however, function as pheromones. "I am coming home," wrote Napoleon to Josephine, "don't wash."

There must be millions of substances, each with its own characteristic smell, all of potential diagnostic value. Fetor hepaticus is well known, as is the fishy smell of non-specific vaginitis, also the uraemic breath, probably caused by amines formed in the gut by decomposing bacteria. In former days old nurses were said to be able to diagnose typhoid fever by the smell. Scientists have

tried to characterise some of these substances by chromatography, but often ended up merely with pages of unidentifiable squiggles.

In the future better methods of on-line separation and characterisation may expand our diagnostic capabilities. Meanwhile imagination has anticipated science in the fictitious Grenouille, hero of Patrick Suskind's *Perfume*. This odd creature had an extraordinary sense of smell and could recognise people or identify the ingredients of even the most complicated perfume by merely sniffing them. To him even milk was quite different each day, depending on how warm it was, what cow it had come from, or what the cow had eaten. Every girl smelled differently and they overwhelmed him with such a plethora of odours that he would fall violently in love and then strangle them to forever possess the precious scent.

Imagine a physician, endowed with such a gift, walking around a ward and diagnosing by smelling all kinds of diseases, some old, some not yet even described. He would need no autoanalysers, not even routine blood tests. But he would also find it intolerable to have a pig next door.—GEORGE DUNFA, attending physician, Cook County Hospital, Chicago, USA