

Strange diseases

Strange diseases may be extinct or contemporary. Commenting on the former, Professor Bernard Straus noted in 1970 that "diseases are mortal and seem to have a life of their own: they are born, flourish for a time, and then die." He mentioned chlorosis, febricula, the sweats, status thymolymphaticus, essential gastrorrhagia, ptomaine poisoning, and the visceroptoses. Ten years later Paul Beeson added miliary fever, encephalitis, lethargica, milk sickness, and the syndromes of Mikulicz, Ayerza, Fröhlich, and Banti. Also that year, in an "Obituary for deceased diseases," Samuel Vaisrub wondered if the medical textbooks should eliminate their chapters on smallpox, but warned that "even though a person may be declared legally dead after a prolonged absence, he may reappear, very much alive."

Modern occupational curiosities include unicyclist's sciatica, penile frostbite (from jogging in shorts in freezing weather), scrum strep (in rugby players), slot machine tendinitis, waterskier's enema, jogger's ples (from jogging without a brassiere), Masco felon (from snapping fingers while dancing), Hunan hand (burns from cooking with dried chilli peppers), proofreader's prostatitis, urban cowboy's rhabdomyolysis (from riding on a mechanical bull and often associated with cowboy boot heel), credit cardosis tremors (while waiting for credit

clearance), and subcompact slump (from riding in small cars).

This year's strange diseases are: water borne diarrhoea in Milwaukee from the parasite *cryptosporidium*; outbreaks of bloody diarrhoea and even haemolytic uraemic syndrome due to toxin producing *Escherichia coli* 0157:H7 in water supplies or hamburgers; a "Gulf syndrome" in war veterans from *Leishmania tropica*; fatal shock or "paralytic shellfish poisoning" from eating shellfish contaminated with toxins produced by algae; a nervous system disease afflicting more than 25 000 people in Cuba; and a mysterious flu-like illness in Arizona and New Mexico that has already claimed the lives of 11 Indians and may be due to a virus carried by rodents.

Also strange are the viruses that kill donkeys, as I reported earlier this year (10 April, p 1007). Since then Dr E Saphier of East Sussex has seen a similar case, which I report with his permission in an abridged form.

"My donkey was also ill. Eventually a blood count showed a low scennic acid, which of course denotes Wieselheimer's syndrome or shortage of smoked salmon. It couldn't be the former because of a negative Xerxes test. However, as we had passed a Public Health Amendment Act, 1993 subsection 1027a, which made it illegal to eat smoked salmon except on Tuesdays, and as Tuesdays as you know now fall on

Wednesday, no wonder the poor animal became ill in spite of his experience in primary care. Moreover, he had developed a violent aversion in C sharp minor to salmon of all sorts, and we were hard put to feed him. . . .

[Treatment] consisted of pulverising the fish and resin-bonding it with micro-fine iron filings, mixing it with ginger jam and baking into pellets which the animal would swallow. A carefully designed reversed polarity solenoid inserted per rectum drew the pellets downward and a computer managed magnetic vest, suitably worn, ensured a null point at the glottis, thus avoiding rhonchi in the bronchi.

"I am glad to inform you that our donkey is improving rapidly, but alas our Sultan too was thought to have died of donkey bite. In fact for reasons which according to Professor Fraud are unfathomable, he decided on a sex change and is now a Sultana. All find it hard to believe that she is him or even that he is she."—GEORGE DUNEA, attending physician, Cook County Hospital, Chicago, USA

