

## The poison diary of 1996 - part III

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Article

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TOWARDS THE YEAR END, CONCERN about food poisoning mounted after a number of such cases were reported, both locally and globally. So too was the increasing concern about the problem of drug abuse.

For Malaysia, in particular, the announcement that our fight against drug abuse had come to nought was a terrible blow, given the emerging problem of "ecstasy." Overall, it was a sad way to end the year.

### September

Concern about food poisoning continued in the month of September. Japan's Health and Welfare Ministry were still at a loss as to the source of food contaminated with *E. coli bacillus 0-157*, which left about 10,000 people sick nationwide and about 200 hospitalised. At the same time, the mayor of Sakai, the city most badly hit by the epidemic said he would take a 40% pay-cut for six months beginning October as he felt responsible for the epidemic.

Almost sharing the same headline on the home front were cases of two restaurants found to be selling curry and lontong contaminated by *E. coli*. Another sold rojak contaminated with *Staphylococcus aureus* in the food. All three were fined.

Another headline that caught attention in September was the panic about "mad beans" in Nigeria. The so-called killer beans were being blamed for a series of sudden and mysterious deaths in Nigeria. A woman allegedly selling the "poisoned beans" was about to be lynched but died after eating some of her own fritters.

The problem with drug abuse, namely "ecstasy" pills remained hot news at home and in neighbouring countries such as Indonesia and Singapore. In Malaysia, the drug was declared *haram*.

In the United States, the National Parents Resources Institute for Drug Education reported that drug use among high school seniors increased sharply. Back on the home front, schools were alerted when hallucination-inducing tattoos, resembling postage stamps targeted at school children, were circulated. The tattoos, circulated earlier in the United States, were believed to be saturated with deadly poisons such as strychnine and the drug LSD.

The local sports arena was also tainted with drugs. A national sprinter was found guilty of taking a banned drug in the run-up for the Olympics. Meanwhile, the German Athletics Federation said that no tea or coffee should be drunk at all before an athlete provided urine for a doping sample. Caffeine in these beverages belong to a grey area of sports medicine and German sports had struggled with related controversial cases in the past.

The sect Aum Supreme truth was ordered to pay 790 million yen (about RM 18.25 million) in compensation for the 1995 March subway nerve gas attack in which 12 people died and more than 5,000 injured. Meanwhile, in Nairobi, government officials met to negotiate an international agreement on hazardous chemicals and pesticides. The talks were to lead to a legally-binding treaty to regulate the import and export of hazardous chemicals.

In Europe, doctors urged airlines to ban smoking on all flights that use European airports to improve the health and safety of passengers and staff. Passengers and cabin crew are exposed to cigarette smoke when the air is recycled in the aircraft.

### October

Japan was hit by another food poisoning scare. This time it involved poisoned pumpkin salad which affected over 200 children. The involvement of the bacillus 0-157 was not immediately confirmed.

In another incident, the Aum Supreme Truth cult threatened to release the deadly bacteria that causes botulism (normally contracted in food) into the atmosphere. A grain of the poison is estimated to be enough to kill more than 100 million people. The bacteria was used in Germany during World War I.

Meanwhile, in Vancouver, Canada, a group called The Animal Avengers - an animal defence group - threatened to poison turkeys meant for Thanks-giving, resulting in the sale of thousands of the birds being halted. In 1994, similar threats were made before Christmas, forcing the destruction of thousands of the animals although no poison was found.

In Ukraine, 126 people were killed and thousands of others hospitalised after consuming poisonous mushrooms picked during the year's bumper harvest.

In Beijing, police in the Guangxi province launched a criminal investigation into a mass poisoning incident that left 200 students hospitalised.

A new aspect of food poisoning that emerged was related to the dangers of genetically-engineered food products, soy bean being the case in point. Numerous non-government agencies in over 70 countries petitioned for an international boycott, saying people could suffer allergic reactions if they consumed the genetically-altered soy bean, in particular when used in infant formulae. The environment group Greenpeace said health and environmental risks could not be excluded despite clearance by the United States and EU health authorities.

Poisoning cases involving seafood were prominent in October as well. In Sabah, the public was warned of the "red tide" phenomenon, an occurrence peculiar to the sea in Sabah's west coast. It is caused by the rapid growth of plankton which turns the sea's surface into a reddish colour. Sea creatures which eat the plankton can cause fatal effects if consumed.

In the Philippines, cyanide was reported to have killed a large number of fish in Manila Bay, due to sewage discharged from the city and nearby towns. In Moscow, scientists said that fish in the Moskvo River were badly mutated and not safe for consumption. Some of the fish had telescopic eyes while others were without fins or even scales. Heavy metals such as zinc and lead and excessive oil products were also found in them.

Shark's fin (a Chinese delicacy) sold in Hong Kong was found to be laden with mercury 10 times more than allowed. When eaten, it could lead to Minamata disease, named after the worst took place around Minamata Bay in Japan some 40 years ago.

In Bangladesh, five members of a family started behaving bizarrely after eating fish from a newly-leased pond. They killed their 62-year-old mother and then a priest who had arrived to help them.

It is the norm to link the poisoning of water sources in general and seafood in particular to pollution as seen in some of the cases cited above. Here are some examples of pollution reported in October alone:

- The State Health Department in Malacca detected coliform bacteria in water supplied to about 2,500 families in 15 estates.
- In Penang, the Department of Environment investigated illegal mud-dumping activities in the which have polluted the water and endangered at least 54 species of fish. The resulting pollution affected the income of some 6,000 fisherman.
- In mid-1996, the 1995 Air and Water Quality Index revealed that agricultural activities, land clearing and discharge of industrial waste had worsened the water quality of rivers in Perak. Ammonical nitrogen discharged by rubber and latex-based factories were identified as the main pollutants of the rivers. Electroplating and textile industries were also implicated.
- In Penang, Sungai Juru was identified as the second most polluted river, after the infamous Sungai Pinang. The former was polluted with household waste and effluent from nearby factories. However, pig waster was the main source of pollution.

Apart from pollution, occupational accidents were also frequently reported. A fork-lift driver was burnt to death when a drum of caustic chemicals fell on him and exploded, engulfing him in flames. The factory he was in was also burnt to the ground. Fire too gutted a chemical complex in Taiwan, killing nine people and injuring over 100 others.

The use of pesticides is another long-standing issue. A local study showed that of 70 children admitted to the Kuala Lumpur Hospital, 11.4% of them ingested pesticide. Pesticide usage has increased over the years due to rising demand for food and rapid growth of cash crop. Cases of pesticide poisoning continued to be reported intermittently in the press.

The "mad cow" disease story appeared again after scientists in Britain found fresh chemical evidence that a new variant of the equivalent disease in humans (CJD) is very similar to that of the animal (BSE).

Drug-related problems were also rampant. Information from the United Nations said that heroin, cannabis and opium psychotropic substances were being trafficked in growing quantities to Vietnamese children. In the first eight months in 1996, more heroin (usually grade 4) was seized compared to 1995.

In Brisbane, Australia, a weekend party turned awry when the cocktails were spiked with a hallucinogenic chemical (code GHB) that caused nine people to collapse. In Texas, a girl was drugged with a sedative Rohypnol and later raped. She subsequently died of an overdose of the drug.

Interesting matters related to smoking were also reported. In Sweden, those under the age of 18 are forbidden to buy cigarettes and tobacco products from January 1997. The legislation, however, stopped short of banning smoking by youths in homes or other private places.

In Malaysia, tobacco companies were warned they would face court action if their sales promoters violated anti-smoking regulation by giving out free cigarettes. Amidst the growing concern of the hazards of smoking, a major tobacco company announced the world's first vanilla-flavoured cigarettes, dubiously claimed to make

smoking more socially acceptable. It was ironically launched in Singapore, a country known for its tough laws against smoking.

### November

Japan and its food poisoning problem continued to make news. The epidemic had spread to the northern part of the country. The managing director of a programme associated with the epidemic committed suicide one day after authorities of Sakai officially declared that the epidemic was over.

Reports on food-related incidents were also rampant on the home front. These include:

- Warnings against seafood contaminated with cadmium in samples tested in Kelantan, Kedah and Perlis.
- Advice to farmers in Sabah to stop using pesticides on their produce following high pesticide residues found in some of the sampling results.
- Discovery of formaldehyde in fish in Sabah after 19 samples revealed that *ikan kayu* and *ikan putih* were contaminated. The same was discovered later in wet markets in Penang.
- Food sold at three foodstalls in Penang were found to contain harmful colouring and contaminated with excessive coliform bacteria. One of the stalls was also found to be selling *belacan* containing banned dye.

The National Poison Centre and the Yayasan Sabah conducted a multi-agency seminar to discuss the finding of a study which indicated that lead poisoning in selected pre-school children in three Sabah districts was imminent. High levels of lead in the body has been known to cause a drop in IQ, especially in young children.

On the same score, the British Medical Journal reported the association between low iron levels and slow child development as well as impairment of behaviour. Lack of iron was reported to render a child even more susceptible to lead poisoning.

### December

The year ended with another major food poisoning story involving *E. Coli*, this time in Scotland. It was reported as the world's worst outbreak linked to two butcher shops, resulting in 11 deaths, most of them elderly victims. The poisoning first affected some pensioners attending a lunch. It was later traced to meat pies supplied by an award-winning Scottish butcher in Lanarkshire.

In England, a 19-year-old became the 12th person to have die of CJD, the degenerative brain disorder suspected to be related to "mad cow" disease.

In the local scene, a warning was issued to the public not to consume *sarer*, a seaweed imported from Thailand. It was found to be contaminated with lead, It is also contained high amounts of iodine and potassium and was regarded unsafe even after cooking.

In Sri Lanka, postage stamps sold from an outlet in the northern part of the country were found to be laced with cyanide.

On the smoking front, researchers at the University of Birmingham indicated that 15% of all childhood cancers may be caused by fathers who smoke. The more a man smoke, the greater risk of illness in his children. Meanwhile, the American Medical Association recently voted in favour of a plan that would require tobacco companies to gradually decrease nicotine content in tobacco products to the point that these products would be nicotine-free within six years.

There was one positive note before the year ended. A leading suspect in the nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subway was put on trial. He was also suspected of being involved in a separate nerve gas attack in June 1994. Shoko Asahara, the leader of the Aum cult, was also put on trial.

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