

The poison diary of 1996 - part II

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Article

[The Sun - 01/11/97](#)

IN THE MONTH OF JUNE TILL August last year, episodes of food poisoning gained prominence in the local scene. May be it's time we took a serious look at ourselves before matters get out of hand.

The cholera outbreak could have turned into a nightmare. Other useful lessons that could be gathered between June and August are those related to control of tobacco in other parts of the world.

Between June and August, many "unusual" poisoning cases occurred, underlying the fact that poisonings can indeed take place anywhere and everywhere, in many unsuspecting ways.

June

The official launch of the Pusat Racun Negara (National Poison Centre) by the Minister of Education took place on June 28, one and a half years after the centre started operations.

This event also coincided with the centre moving into a new premise in the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) campus).

Ecstasy pills continued to attract the attention of the public, following a number of arrest. A Federal Anti-Narcotic Chief was quoted as saying that those found involved in the making, sale or possession of the drug will be charged under the Dangerous Drug Act, which prescribed the mandatory death sentence if convicted.

June too noted a number of anti-smoking activities carried out globally. For example:

- Shanghai set up China's first "smoke free street" with signs banning the habit posted at both ends of the 400m Pingliang Road.
- Sydney, Australia's biggest city, mounted an anti-litter drive against smokers forced out of "smoke-free" offices and who used the city as an ashtray.
- An Indonesian Governor, a staunch opponent of smoking, refused to handle documents smelling of tobacco.
- In another tobacco-related incident in Egypt, a nine-year-old boy was set alight for delaying fetching a cigarette when asked to do so.

June also had its fair share of major food poisoning cases. An important event was reported in Japan, where potentially deadly food poisoning from a colon bacillus known as 0-157 had infected more than 1,400 people. It claimed the lives of three children. It was the worst outbreak since a similar one in 1990.

In Sydney, over 50 people were hit by salmonella food poisoning due to allegedly contaminated peanuts traced to a supplier. Salmonella intestinal infection was also reported in four babies in Ohio, the United States, because of the presence of family pet - a snake and three iguanas.

Meanwhile in Ukraine, which is facing hard times and food shortages, nine people died after eating poisonous wild mushrooms.

On the home front, just recovering from the cholera outbreak in May, the Health Ministry adopted a preventive strategy to ensure that food and drinking water are safe for human consumption. At the same time, food poisoning cases continued to be reported in schools.

One other highlight for the month was call by the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) for a policy covering major disaster hazard installations or plants that are accident-prone. This is an important move in view of the number of untoward incidents involving such installations throughout the year.

Since February, the Control of Industrial Major Accident Hazards Regulations came into effect. They were targeted at sites identified as major hazard installations or plants that have a potential for accidents involving fire, explosions and toxic exposure.

Related to this was a survey done by a local university which showed that policemen had excessive lead content in their blood after being exposed to fumes emitted by vehicles while on duty in Kuala Lumpur. In August, the National Poison Centre also submitted a report about the possibility of lead poisoning in pre-school children in the west coast of Sabah.

In the international scene, French announced a ban on the use of asbestos beginning January 1997. Poisoning due to asbestos are particularly challenging because those exposed may show no signs of illness for as long as 40 years.

July

The food poisoning incident in Japan escalated into crisis proportion, bringing the number of those who fell ill to the 0 - 157 bacteria to more than 8,500 with a number in critical condition, as well as killing seven people.

The illness caused severe vomiting, diarrhoea and fever that could be life-threatening due to loss of blood pressure and dehydration. The Japanese government warned its public not to eat raw meat. Meanwhile, sales of fruits and seafood suspected to be involved was affected. A kindergarten headmaster was given a suspended two-year jail sentence for ignoring health warnings regarding the matter.

In another incident, Hong Kong's maximum security prison was hit with an outbreak of suspected food poisoning involving more than 100 inmates. In Hong Kong too, environmentalists urged the government to reject consignments of contaminated waste coming mainly from the United States, Britain, Japan and China.

The "mad cow" disease (also known as bovine spongiform encephalopathy) that reared its ugly head earlier in the year was reported to have spread to sheep, according to the European Union Farm. Following this, sheep breeders in the United States called for a ban on imports of all foreign sheep. Meanwhile, Greece slaughtered 7,000 cattle, sheep, pigs and goats following an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease, a highly infectious illness.

At the same time, the World Health Organisation (WHO) announced that old diseases such as tuberculosis and malaria were making a deadly comeback in many parts of the world. So too were cholera and yellow fever. During the last two decades, 30 new infections had also emerged, threatening the health of millions.

In the first half of the year, France conducted a nuclear test in the South Pacific, July saw China conducting one in the Xinjiang region. Both countries claimed each to be the final test heralding a moratorium on testing.

Meanwhile two accidents occurred at a nuclear station in Ukraine, killing a man and causing contamination. It raised new worries similar to those after the Chernobyl disaster in 1986. In Northern Iran, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said some 25 people were exposed to radioactive material in an incident at a power station.

August

This time the previous year, Japan was preoccupied with the 50th anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In August 1996, the Japanese food poisoning saga seemed to get worse. The number of infected people climbed to 9,700 and the infection claimed its 11th victim. It was feared that the infection might spread to Tokyo.

The Japanese health authorities outlined new hygiene guidelines for school lunches in an attempt to avert another mass food poisoning. Meanwhile, a blackmailer was arrested after allegedly threatening to contaminate food with the germ. It was reported the man wanted the ransom money so as to be able to settle his 30 million yen debt.

Another major food poisoning outbreak took place in India, killing 21 people and affecting 100 others, most in critical condition. Public officials suspected the culprit to be botulism. Another incident was the cholera outbreak in Mongolia, and the local authorities had to put more than 1,500 people in quarantine. The outbreak might have started from contaminated food and water supplied in this country which borders Russia. In Sri Lanka, 600 to 800 people were ill after drinking polluted water.

In the United States, a new study indicated that salami might be contaminated with the food-borne bacteria, E.coli. The lack of stringent food-processing safety standards governing the production of the food was blamed. The bacteria was found to be able to withstand the fermentation process. More than 20,000 cases of E.coli-related cases are reported in the United States each year.

In the United States too, President Bill Clinton was all set to endorse a proposal to declare nicotine an addictive and sales, a step aimed to curb teenage smoking. Last year, nicotine in tobacco was declared an addictive drug, making this declaration a legal basis for cutting back sales and marketing of the product to young people.

As the world was preparing for the Centennial Olympics in Atlanta, authorities were alerted to watch out for the use of a new drug to hide traces of steroids. The drug was bromantan, classified as a stimulant and allegedly manufactured by the Russian army. Many feared the drug would be feature in the 1996 Olympic.

In Malaysia, the call to ban the use of nitrofurans in poultry feed was heeded by the government. An immediate ban was imposed in chicken and animal feed by the Cabinet because of its cancer-causing effects. A study conducted by the Health Ministry on 142 random samples of chicken meat sold found that 51% had various levels of nitrofurans residue. Nitrofurans is listed under the Poison Act 1952.

Contrary to the above, the case of the illegal dumping of cyanide at the Pangkor resort in the previous year ended disappointingly. Those involved, a company director and his brother-in-law, were fined a total of RM15,000 and jailed for only a day for such a heinous crime. The dumping could have threatened the lives of about seven million people should a disaster occur.

On the other fronts, August saw a complete range of various types of poisonings, varying from chemicals to pesticides, medicines to foods as well as bites and stings.

First, a chemical warehouse containing toxic substances such as paraquat was razed by fire in Klang. Thirteen firemen who battled the fire were hospitalized for inhaling toxic gases. A few days earlier, the Human Resources Ministry announced that it would launch a month-long campaign to create greater awareness on the importance of occupational safety and health.

Earlier in the month, a poisonous gas leak was detected in Mersing. No one was reported injured.

Pesticides also posed similar dangers. The Health Ministry Disease Control Division reported that 16% of 203 deaths caused by pesticide poisoning in Malaysia last year were linked to accidents in the workplace. Notification of poisoning by attending doctors had been poor.

Medicinal painkillers too made headlines in August when a medical professor from a local university said that more teenage girls were resorting to an overdose of painkillers in suicide attempts. Easy accessibility was said to be among the reason for this trend.

In addition, August also recorded cases of snake bites and hornet stings. The former involved the bites of *tedung rimba* on a one-year-old girl. The snake refused to let go of the child even after her mother came to her rescue. The latter involved a four-year-old boy who died in an unconscious state after being stung by a swarm of hornets in a rubber estate.

There was a reported case of food poisoning too, which took place in an army camp. At the same time, a nation-wide campaign on *Lilati* control at food premises was announced by the Health Ministry. *Lilati* is short for *lipas* (cockroach), *lalat* (fly) and *tikus* (rats).

Unusual global cases of poisoning between June and August '96

- A FACIAL CREAM USED BY A Chinese women in Anhui province managed to attract thousands of bees. She was rushed to hospital with a badly swollen face and head.
- Some leading brands of baby milk were alleged to contain phthalates, a chemical that could impair fertility.
- Seven fishermen were killed by poisonous gas released by rotting fish in their boats in eastern Zhejiang.
- The Church of Zion in Hong Kong told their worshippers to drink hydrogen peroxide, a commonly used antiseptic fluid, to cleanse their body and soul.
- Over 100 people were seriously ill and 18 people died in Lima after drinking home-made rum apparently produced from methyl alcohol.
- In Bombay, three shop owners sold contaminated sweets to children, causing about 300 children to fall ill.
- In London, a woman was banned from attending and participating in dog shows for doping a rival's chihuahua with valium, a sedative hypnotic.
- A family pet Burmese python bit her pregnant owner on the thumb and buttock in a San Diego hotel, then wrapped itself around her. Paramedics had to use a small hacksaw to cut off the snake's head and release the women.

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