

A Brief History of Poisons

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"Let me have, A dram of poison, such soon-speeding gear, As will disperse itself through all the veins, That the lift-weary talker may fall dead, And that the trunk may be discharged of' breath, As violently as hasty powder fir'd, Doth hurry from the fatal cannon's womb."

Today, poisonings are a significant cause of mortality and morbidity. A 16th century physician, Paracelsus noted that all substances known to man are poisons, and only the amount or dose determines the effect. As such, poisons have been part of the history of mankind. From the days of Socrates to the present time, poisons have never ceased to be an integral part of man. A number of well-known literature's never failed to mention the word 'poisons' since time immemorial. The famous being William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet:

In more recent times, Agatha Christie in her writings often used poisons as part of her plot. Since 1920 until 1975, among the 85 books that she wrote, 41 involved poisons; whereas of the 148 short stories written, poisons were implicated in 24 of them. Likewise, Lewis Carroll in her famous book 'Alice in Wonderland,' wrote:

"She had never forgotten that, if you drink much from a bottle marked 'poison', is almost certain to disagree with you, sooner or later."

Even since the prehistoric days, poisons were also an important part of the culture. For the Sumerians, ca. 4500 BC, there was a deity, called Gula, said to be the 'Controller of Noxious Poisons'. No less of the prehistoric deities were themselves victims of poisonings. The Egyptian god Horus, the son of Isis, for instance, died of a scorpion poisoning; whereas the Sun god, RA, almost died being bitten by a poisonous snake.

In the Asian culture too, there were frequent references to the use of poisons. For example, in the Hindu Veda it was noted that there were specific directions in the detection of poisoners:

"He does not answer questions, or the answers are evasive. He speaks nonsense, rubs the great toe along the ground and shivers. His face is discolored. He rubs the roots of the hair with his fingers and tries by every means to leave the house. The food which is suspected should be given to animals. It is necessary for the practitioner to have knowledge of the symptoms of' the different poisons and their antidotes, as the enemies of the Raja, bad women and ungrateful servants sometimes mix poison with food."

Similarly, in the Malay and Chinese cultures, there were many records of poisons as well as charm cures. These include extensive documentation of poisons obtained from fish, snakes, slugs and also plants and herbs. Arsenic, cyanide, mercury and other inorganic salts too are not unheard in the Asian world of charms and magic. The Malays even have special concoction called 'santau'- said to be a potent weapon in many unsolved murders.

From such episodes emerged magicians, sorcerers and poisoners, the like of which have never failed to excite children in tales like that of Snow White and the Seven Dwarf (please insert picture of Snow White eating the 'poisoned' apple). In many others there are always wicked witches to spice up the stories with their variety of potions and charms.

Poisons thus, were generally clouded with mystery and intrigue such that those who are familiar with their uses carried with them an aura of power and magic. But this is no longer true to a large extent.

Looking from another dimension, 'poisons' in many ways have helped man to survive. A number of them till this day, are still being used for hunting and capturing animals. The natives or our aboriginal ancestors have acquired special skills in preparing some of these naturally occurring poisons, that they are invariably protected from them. So much so some are brought into use in treatment of certain diseases. Curare, a plant poison, perhaps is a good example. Although being used as a lethal substance on arrow-heads and in blowpipes, for the purposes of hunting down animals by paralyzing their respiration; it has been turned into a modern drug called tubocurarine. Today, tubocurarine is one of the most useful drugs in the treatment of certain neuromuscular diseases. In fact, tubocurarine is very much used as a preanesthetic agent.

Likewise, the toxic 'Foxgloves' continues to be the drug of choice in a number of cardiovascular ailments (please insert picture of Foxgloves). From animal sources, there are venoms of killer snakes that are regularly being harvested for the creation of antidotes and even treatment of other diseases. All these eventually paved the way to modern toxicology, the systematic study of poisons. As toxicology develops into a modern scientific discipline, poisons are slowly being demystified such that their presence are strictly regulated. At the same time their uses are limited by stringent laws. And where possible antidotes sought and supportive treatment instituted.

From these examples we should be able to appreciate that poisons are part of us. As implied by Paracelsus, it is man himself that will make the difference - the way he conducts himself and his daily affairs. If man continues to be apathetic and act irresponsibly to himself and his environment, than nearly everyone is at risk of acute and chronic toxic exposures to hazardous substances in the ambient environment, sometimes unknowingly.

In the last few weeks, the lessons learnt from the cyanide contamination in Pangkor (please insert picture) and the devastating effects of the war gas, sarin, which happened almost simultaneously in Tokyo (please insert picture), serve to illustrate how fragile things are with respect to the potent and ruthless poisons. Only by elevating our awareness and by taking the necessary precautions can we protect ourselves and our families. Ultimately making our ailing planet a more secure and safe place for all of us.

It is the intention of this weekly column to provide a forum for discussion regarding poisons and poison prevention.

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