



Fear and Illness

*"That which is clearly known hath less terror than that which is but hinted at and guessed."*¹

Can you find yourself in any of the following? If so, welcome to the club.

In 1996 Bob Garfield, a magazine writer, reviewed articles about serious diseases published over the course of a year in the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times* and *USA Today*. He learned that, in addition to 59 million Americans with heart disease, 53 million with migraines, 25 million with osteoporosis, 16 million with obesity and 3 million with cancer, many Americans suffer from more obscure ailments such as temporomandibular joint disorders (10 million) and brain injuries (2 million). Adding up the estimates, Garfield determined in a nation of 266 million inhabitants, "Either as a society we are doomed, or someone is seriously double-dipping," he suggested."²

Included in Garfield's estimates was the figure of 53 million for psychiatric ailments. However, when Jim Windolf, an editor of the *New York Observer*, collated estimates for maladies ranging from borderline personality disorder (10 million) and sex addiction (11 million) to less well-known conditions as restless leg syndrome (12 million), he came up with a figure of 152 million. "But give the experts a little time," he advised. "With another new quantifiable disorder or two, everybody in the country will be officially nuts."²

There's more. Some three million Americans believe they've encountered bright lights and incurred strange bodily marks indicative of a possible encounter with aliens, according to a recent poll.³

Other disorders on the rise have been the so-called diseases of modern life such as CFS/ME (Chronic Fatigue Syndrome or Myalgic Encephalomyelitis), ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder), PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) and MCS (Multiple

Chemical Sensitivity). Professor Simon Wessely, from the Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London, is one the world's leading experts in the analysis of such syndromes. In his work he has explored the correlation between those countries where there is a heightened awareness of potential chemical toxicity and the incidence of psychosomatic symptoms. According to Wessely, Sweden, one of the countries at the forefront of restricting chemical use within Europe, with a policy of making its environment 'toxic-free' by 2020, has one of the highest levels of self-reported sensitivities to chemicals in the developed world. "It would appear, then, that too much risk awareness can quite literally make you sick."⁴

This isn't as far-fetched as it might sound at first. Researchers in Belgium have shown that participants who had been given warnings about environmental pollution reported more symptoms to benign odors than those who did not.⁴

Barry Glassner reports, "We compound our worries beyond all reason. Life expectancy in the U.S. has doubled during the twentieth century. We are better able to cure and control diseases than any other civilization in history. Yet we hear that phenomenal numbers of us are dreadfully ill." He adds, "The scope of our fear seems limitless. Besides worrying disproportionately about legitimate ailments and prematurely about would-be diseases, we continue to fret over already refuted dangers."²

Why is an epidemic of fear sweeping America? Dr. Marc Siegel, nationally renowned health commentator says that we live in an artificially created culture of fear. We hear of the anthrax panic, the SARS "epidemic," West Nile virus and official rumors of bioterror to Orange alerts by continual bombardment. Most of the time the disasters never materialize.

In his book, *False Alarm*, Siegel identifies three major catalysts of the culture

of fear - government, the media and big pharma.

He notes, "The mass media tend to magnify the latest health concern and broadcast it to millions of people at once. This has the effect of elevating an issue to a grand scale and provoking panic way out of proportion to the risks. I call this phenomenon the 'bug du jour.' And when a new threat hits, private companies take their cues from media outlets and begin to line up for profit. Government officials then grab the media megaphone and add to the concern."⁵

Americans rarely worry about the real worldwide killer diseases: tuberculosis - over 8 million new cases every year, AIDS - 5 million new cases; malaria - over 300 million new cases and over a million deaths due to each of these. Approximately 40,000 people die of influenza in the United States every year, a statistic that went unnoticed until 2003, when it was the flu's turn on the wheel of hype. In 2000, 63,000 Americans died of pneumonia and 15,000 people died of AIDS. This information stayed out of the news.

However, since 9/11 we have become much more sensitive. The following list is familiar because of much media attention, in some cases media panic.⁶

Anthrax	October 2001
West Nile	Summer 2002
Smallpox	Fall & Winter 2002
SARS	April 2003
Flu	December 2003
Mad Cow	December 2003
Bird Flu	January 2004
Flu	August 2004

When anthrax appeared. 30,000 people were treated with antibiotics, but only 22 people were afflicted.⁷ Today, there are no mailboxes at JFK airport in New York. They've been removed because of fear of

Continued on page 21.

Do realize that the bake time and temperature required to do the job may be much more than the standards ask for. Always test.

Do use solvent degreasing, alkaline soak cleaning or anodic alkaline cleaning (if required for specific soils).

Do use inhibited acid for pickling, if pickling is really necessary. Not all inhibitors work well. Test the results.

Do consider shot grit blasting, vibratory cleaning and shot peening. Shot peening is good for lowering the surface stress.

Do consider alternative coating processes such as mechanical plating of zinc, Ti-cad or other suitable metals. There is also powder coating to consider.

Don'ts

Don't assume that just because you followed the recommended post plating bake cycle that the hydrogen is removed sufficiently to pass the tests.

Don't use strong or non-inhibited acid pickles.

Don't use the same bake cycle for electroless nickel deposits unless there is an unplated escape area on the part.

Don't rely on a simple bend test shortly after plating. Bend tests are not reliable for hydrogen embrittlement determination. There is no reliable quick test.

Don't use cathodic preplating treatments. A nickel strike for activation of stainless and other nickel-containing alloys may be required. Be assured that there will be significant infusion of hydrogen. A longer than usual bake cycle may be required.

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3. W. Paatsch, *Plating & Surface Finishing*, **83** (9), 70 (1996).
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Fact or Fiction?

Continued from page 19.

anthrax. Ask someone in United's Red Carpet room to mail something for you, and they will say, "We are forbidden to do that because of anthrax."⁸

West Nile virus was the "bug du jour" of summer 2002 and perceived by the media as a great threat. Yet in comparison to our real killer bugs, only 284 people died. Again from Siegel, "There was no media memory. As West Nile faded in the fall, no one at any network or any newspaper thought to apologize for overstating the case. There were no retractions, no amendments, just simply no more front page coverage and no more headlines on cable TV."⁷

Smallpox was next on the scare chart in spite of the fact that it hadn't made anyone sick in the U.S. in over fifty years. "With smallpox, the greatest problem in the fall and winter of 2002 was an exaggerated sense of risk on all sides. The smallpox scare was a new category of absurd over-reaction when compared with the previous public health hypes."⁹

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) arrived in 2003 and became almost synonymous with the word virus. There were only 7,000 cases in the world, and fewer than 100 in the United States. No one here died of SARS, but a lot of people worried unnecessarily. Siegel reports, "Many patients called me in the spring of 2003 convinced that the slightest cough was SARS. People were afraid to sit next to an Asian person or to eat in a Chinese restaurant."⁶

Siegel says this about bird flu, "According to a significant study published in the prestigious British journal *Nature* recently, the H5N1 bird flu virus is at least two large mutations and two small mutations away from being the next human pandemic virus. This virus attaches deep in the lungs of birds but cannot adhere to the upper respiratory tract of humans. Since we can't transmit the virus to each other, it poses little immediate threat to us."¹⁰

"Even the word 'pandemic' scares us unnecessarily. The word simply means a new strain of a virus appearing in several areas of the world at one time and causing illness. The last flu pandemic, in 1968, killed 33,800 Americans - slightly less than the number who usually die here of the flu in an average year. We certainly don't need to think in end-of-the-world terms for that kind of pandemic."¹⁰

Flu changes its shape and size and is a killer worthy of respect and attention. But the most contagious virus among humans is our fear.

Summary

"Media obsession not only misinforms but also, diverts attention from the real dangers. Misdirection means ignoring the fact that millions don't have health insurance and millions are malnourished. Mad cow is only a tiny risk. Only 150 deaths compared to other food borne illnesses. The media misdirects us away from 500,000 cases of salmonella food poisoning. They use an isolated incident to wrongly profess a trend."¹¹

As Siegel concludes, "We are scaring ourselves about the wrong things in a way that is clearly a terrorist's delight. (We do much of the work for them). In 2001, terrorists killed 2,978 people in the United States, including the five from anthrax, and we have been obsessed with terrorism and the supposed risks ever since."¹² P&SF

References

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12. M. Siegel, *False Alarm*, p. 196.