

8-26-11 *Is Dr. House in The House?*

It seemed that everywhere I went last weekend, I was confronted with public health issues. I was reading up on communicable diseases (Okay, that was a choice; not a confrontation) and there are some pretty interesting ones. I'd find myself thinking of Dr. House as I would highlight obscure, seemingly unrelated symptoms such as palpitations and giddiness. That was due to Cyanide poisoning. This used to be and still can be seen as a result of ingesting silver polishing products. Then there was the paralysis of the arms from Antimony poisoning. This was usually seen as a result of using grey enameled cookware. At about his point I was thankful for regulatory oversight of all food related things and activities.

The section on foodborne illnesses has some good ones for emergency room physicians to be aware of. A presentation of spasms, heavy tongue and facial stiffness would be the result of Ciguatera poisoning. It is a toxin that is not toxic to the fish but is to humans and is not destroyed by cooking! I think I do not want to eat warm water fish such as barracuda, snapper, grouper or sea bass.

Every once in a while my office will receive a notice of Giardiasis from ingesting water infected with Giardia, those little flagellated protozoan parasites. The patients, so far, have not known where it was contracted, as they had not been camping and/or drinking surface water. Somewhere along the line, though, someone came in contact with infected waters, either on raw "fresh" fruit (always rinse) or even the oh-so-common, invisible and expeditious method of travel: "hand to mouth/oral-fecal". That's an express train for just about everything. This is why we teach our children the importance of hand washing.

Thoughts of hand washing brought back the pleasant memory of my father cleaning our fingernails with his pocket knife before meals and before bed. He always had his pocket knife on him. He would be sitting in a chair and call us over one by one. I would turn around and feel so protected and comforted with my father's arms around me, showing him my nails. He would gently scrape under the nails getting them cleaner than we would have on our own. Then, we would go and wash our hands at the bathroom sink.

That was not the only family scene that surfaced while reading about food borne illness. To my surprise, rhubarb poisoning was on the list. How I love rhubarb and strawberries in the spring! I did already know that the leaves are poisonous, though. I knew this because my Aunt Gertrude once told the story of the day she was preparing rhubarb stalks and wondered why she should throw away all those greens. At this point she began to giggle as she recalled what she unknowingly did to her husband, who loved other greens such as beet leaves and kale. So, she cooked up a batch and served them to her husband. He ate some and declared them to be pretty

good but not as good as beet greens. Well, right on time, a few hours later, he suffered from cramps and vomiting. He was lucky. He did not go into convulsions or coma. My aunt ended her story with the realization that she could have killed him! She still laughed a little as she said it though. My book wisely lists under the Prevention and Control for rhubarb poisoning: “Do not use rhubarb leaves for food.” Spread the word on that one!

A bit sick of reading about sicknesses from toxins, bacteria, viruses and parasites in food, I took a break from reading and turned on the television. The show that was on at that moment was “*Bed Bug Apocalypse*”. I began to feel itchy right away. One woman’s bed bugs arrived with the new mattress that had been delivered. She woke up with tiny speckles of blood on her body and on her sheets. Not knowing how to get rid of them, she lived with them for eight months. Those eight months were so filled with stress and a sense of shame, she developed bald spots. She finally walked away from her apartment and all her belongings. I couldn’t help but wonder about all the other apartments in that high rise. The show did not reveal what happened.

Another bed bug victim was the mother of six in a lovely house in rural Connecticut. After attempting to wash and dry every piece of clothing and bedding in the house, and spot treat with pesticides, she eventually wrote a check for \$10,000 to have the whole house treated. It was successful. I was glad for her that it was successful because it would be so easy to be scammed on treatments for bed bugs. It is an area wide open for entrepreneurs, though, for those who are willing to go in there and deal with them. Are you?

So...., enough with the parasites and bugs! I turned the channel and there was a documentary on a sanatorium for tuberculosis patients. Was it good? I’ll tell you later.

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