

12-05-14 No Bold, Old Health Agents

At perc tests, we sometimes encounter angry bees placing us in danger of allergic reactions to bee stings, but there are other bugs with the ability to kill a health agent. Of course, there's plenty of ticks carrying Lyme disease. I've had Lyme disease three times! And we might be "bugged" by poison ivy. We are well served by knowing our plants! But, I'm thinking of the "bugs" that are so tiny, they aren't even seen. It took several sinus infections and cases of bronchitis before I realized the importance of wearing a mask when entering a home with mold and moisture problems and/or homes with filth. When entering homes after floods or of hoarders or the elderly with dementia, not only is it important to wear a face mask, but also gloves and washable footwear or disposable shoe covers. Even with those personal protection measures, I still run the risk of headaches and skin rashes from filthy dust, bacteria and fungi spores floating in the air, along with fleas, mites and rodent droppings and urine. Careful removal and disposal of the protection items, in much the same way a nurse would, along with thorough washing, is critical to preventing illnesses, ranging from a temporary nuisance, to serious, to life threatening.

One example of the many possible diseases a health agent might unknowingly come in contact with while inspecting a home with filth and evidence of rodents is Leptospirosis. It is caused by several strains of the *Leptospira* bacterium, found in the urine of unvaccinated animals, wild animals and in contaminated water. In fact, there is a really good episode of the television show, *House*, in which a man is in the hospital with all kinds of systemic problems before developing the coma-like "locked in" syndrome, where a person is aware of everything but cannot speak or move. Eye movement becomes one of the few laborious ways of communicating. After almost killing the man with several wrong diagnoses, in true and usual *House* fashion, it is discovered that the man had been working as a janitor in a building with a rat problem. Rodents leave trails of urine even more profuse than their droppings. Upon the rodent discovery revealing the possibility of the patient having Leptospirosis, he is examined and found that he was dying from a paper cut on his finger, giving the bacteria the opportunity to enter! The show concludes with the miraculous antibacterial treatment saving the man's life. I love that show and I love my primary care physician, Dr. George Cuchural, an infectious disease "bug guy", who is brilliant, does have not the God Complex and, unlike Dr. House, he actually cares about people. If I get really sick with a mysterious illness, please call him for me! His number is 781 331 9300. I can't dial that with my eyelid blinks if I develop the locked in syndrome from rodent urine-soaked debris at a home inspection!

In addition to physical, allergic, fungal and bacterial risks, there are also chemical ones facing health agents. It could happen when responding to a complaint of strange odors but the classic example for a health agent is when the Fire Department says, "Okay, the fire is out and the Building Inspector has determined the building is structurally sound, so now the Board of Health can decide when it is safe to re-enter." Substances ignited by the fire have entered the

smoke, others may have been released when they came in contact with water and the fire extinguishers left their own residue. A consult with experts is needed in those cases before we enter or advise others in clean-up actions.

Among the corrosive, explosive, irritating and toxic, let us not forget that even the people encountered by health agents can pose a danger. They are sometimes angry and agitated. They are sometimes strung out on drugs. While good communication skills and patience go a long way towards preventing a volatile situation, an escort by a police officer is also very welcome indeed!

I hope someday that the retirement plans for health agents reflect the risks and dangers encountered as opposed to the current one placing us in the same category as the administrative person who never leaves the office. And I hope I make it to retirement, for I now understand that there are old health agents and there are bold health agents but there are no old, bold health agents.

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