



Mercurial matters

The qualities of the liquid metallic form of mercury have a fascination for children. However, it is usually seen contained in thermometers, where these qualities are not readily apparent. Don Emby provides us with a case in which a patient accidentally swallowed a broken thermometer bulb (p. 744). Since mercury is a potentially toxic substance, does this pose a danger to the patient? In an accompanying editorial, Jonny Myers explores the history, clinical and epidemiological importance of mercury (p. 772).

The condition associated with acute and chronic mercury poisoning is called mercurialism. It is a combination of neurological symptoms and signs that include erratic paranoid behavioural disturbance named erethism.

Historically mercury nitrate salts were used as a fungicide for felt preservation of hats. There is an interesting South African cultural connection as the French Huguenots held a monopoly on the process of *secretage* of felt. Following their persecution and relocation to England, the hat industry there received a boost.

Inorganic mercury has many uses including extraction of gold and silver from ore, and dental amalgam. Organic mercury compounds are used as antiseptics, diuretics, pesticides (mainly fungicides) and preservatives in paints in the chemical industry. Before penicillin, mercury compounds were used in the treatment of syphilis – ‘one night with Venus and a lifetime with mercury’.

The most infamous example of the toxic effects of methylmercury occurred in Japan, where between 1930 and 1960 a petrochemical company dumped large quantities of the chemical in Minimata Bay. This resulted in high concentrations of methylmercury in the food chain and poisoning of fish eaters on the shore.

Did Hitler have syphilis?

Francois Retief, after retiring from an illustrious medical leadership career, has provided the *SAMJ* with a number of medical-historical papers. On this occasion he and his colleague, Professor Wessels from the Department of History at the University of the Free State, researched Adolf Hitler's medical history, specifically to determine whether syphilis may have accounted for his symptoms and behaviour (p. 750).

They conclude that rumours that Hitler acquired syphilis at the age of 20 years, with possible reinfection during World War I, cannot be verified. He was sexually rather inactive during his life. Suggestions that his cardiac lesion and complaints such as transitory blindness, tremor of the left arm and leg, recurring abdominal pain and skin lesions of the leg were of syphilitic aetiology are not acceptable. The authors' view is that more likely causes of organic brain disease include amphetamine abuse or post-encephalitic damage, perhaps aggravated

by Hitler's inherent anxiety neurosis and a chronic stress syndrome.

Music and life

Barry Smith, who has brought pleasure to vast numbers of music lovers both through his organ recitals and as a conductor, has received high honours for his many contributions to music and to the community. Now for *SAMJ* readers he provides further pleasure by his analysis of the magic of music and its relationship with and influence on our lives (p. 746).

Music is the ultimate throw-away art. Hours of preparation go into one brief performance. In life we also get only one chance for each thing we do and we should therefore do this to the best of our ability. Once begun, the performance of a piece of music must go on. One cannot stop and correct mistakes already made, one can only try not to do them again.

Harmony is one of the most vital elements in music. So in life we need to form harmonious relationships with others. Much of music relates to science – it is a precise system of putting dots on lines or in spaces, which are applied to instruments or voices. Yet no two performances will ever sound exactly the same, because of the all-important human element that turns science into an art.

Smith notes that music as an art exists in time. A piece of music lasts for a fixed period of time. We grow older during this time and are influenced by the music. A musical performance is thus a kind of mini-version of life itself.

Non-communicable disease: diabetes

It is estimated that more than 1.5 million South Africans had diabetes mellitus during the last decade. This is likely to be higher today, as the prevalence of diabetes is growing worldwide. Two articles tell different stories about the management of diabetes.

Kenneth Huddle reports on the outcome of pregnancy in diabetic women in Soweto following the establishment of a combined specialist clinic at Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital in 1983 (p. 789). Sub-Saharan Africa does not generally share the improved outlook for the diabetic mother and her offspring that pertains in developed countries. A specialised service for pregnant mothers for a sustained period of 20 years proved feasible and was of significant benefit.

A less rosy picture is painted by Haque and colleagues (p. 798), who investigated the barriers to and offer suggestions on initiating insulin therapy with type 2 diabetes mellitus in public-sector primary health care centres in Cape Town.

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