



The South African Medical Journal

100 years ago: A case of spurious pregnancy

One morning, at nine o'clock, I received an urgent call to a case of labour. On arrival patient stated that she had been in labour most of the night, that now pains were coming every two or three minutes, and that the husband had gone for the nurse.

She gave me the following history. Age 45, married 15 years, had never been pregnant, and always regular till about April, 1902, when periods ceased, and her abdomen and breasts increased in size. She consulted a medical man on several occasions, and was assured that she was not pregnant, but in December was seized, quite unexpectedly, with labour pains, and was delivered of a small child, stated to be about eight months. This child died in seven or eight days.

Her periods recommenced in February, 1903, and she had been regular ever since, but had again noticed her abdomen and breasts getting larger. For the last three months milk had been present in the breasts. She had also had 'fluttering' in the abdomen for some time back, and concluded that she was pregnant nearly full time.

On examination I found that the patient was fat, especially about abdomen and hips, that she was very nervous, and that the breasts were large, the nipples dark, and thick yellow milk easily expressed. The abdomen was distended and tympanitic, and neither tumour nor foetus could be felt. During the examination the patient had a 'pain', but no uterine contraction could be made out.

P.V.- Vagina normal, secretion not increased, no blood. The cervix was high up, small and hard, and the os contracted. The uterus was freely moveable, not enlarged, and in normal position.

I assured the patient that she was not pregnant, and prescribed a carminative and bromide mixture. On a later visit she assured me that the abdomen had rapidly diminished in size, and that the pains had ceased at once. The fact that she had been previously deceived as to her condition, and the presence of milk in the breasts coinciding with the enlargement of both breasts and abdomen, had naturally caused the patient to think she was pregnant, although she was seeing her menstrual periods regularly.

50 years ago: State of nerves of modern mankind

To the Editor:

In his highly interesting but provocative article 'Modern Trends in Pharmacology and Therapeutics in Relation to Nutrition' (this Journal, 29 August 1953, page 745), Dr. Douw G. Steyn voices the rhetorical statement: 'Is it going too far when I say that deficiencies of B-complex vitamins and of certain amino-acids and the great prevalence of DDT in our food are in a measure responsible for the deplorable .. state of nerves of modern mankind?' The insecticidal properties of DDT were discovered and tested by Dr. Paul Milner in 1938, and Britain and America were the first to put this insecticide to practical use in the field of hygiene and preventive medicine in 1943. As an agricultural insecticide in connection with the production of food, DDT has been in use for rather less than a decade. In the long history of mankind few periods can compare with the sustained tension over the past turbulent (and, at times, chaotic) 50 years, accompanied, as they have been, by so much passion and pain, so much sorrow and sadness, so much discord and so many disappointments, such fears and frustrations; and followed by such bitter disillusion. It might seem a trifle illogical to accuse deficiencies in vitamins and hitherto harmless insecticides for creating a 'state of nerves' in modern man, when he may simply be manifesting the results of emotions and experiences indoctrinated into more than 2 generations.

Acute poisoning with DDT is an established fact, the signs and symptoms of which are known. Experimental controlled research confined to animals over weeks and months has produced evidence of chronic poisoning. No such research on a large scale and over a prolonged period, for obvious reasons, has been possible with human beings, so that labelling unidentified diseases and illness as due to chronic poisoning with DDT is pure conjecture.

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