

Toxins Are Us

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"May you live in interesting times."

- *ancient curse*

I've got good news and bad news. The bad news is not really news to many of us, but recently it was confirmed by hard science: We are all walking Superfund sites. This also applies to those who lead relatively "clean lives" by eating organic foods, breathing fresh ocean air and drinking pristine water. Even these fortunate folks are contaminated. Let me explain.

A collaboration consisting of Mt. Sinai School of Medicine in New York, the Environmental Working Group (EWG) in Washington D.C., and Commonweal, a health and environmental research institute in Bolinas, California, recently released the results of a study which assayed the blood and urine of nine individuals, aged 34-68, for 210 known toxic chemicals. The fewest number of chemicals found in one person was 77; the most was 106. In all, 166 chemicals on the list of 210 were found. These people were not randomly selected, but were, for the most part, highly educated and affluent. Most were well-versed in eating organic, healthy food and avoiding known carcinogens in their daily lives. Among the chemicals found, all nine people had PCBs, which have been banned in this country since 1976. Also found were dioxins; furans; phthalates; solvents; and lead. These compounds are suspected of causing cancer; nervous system disorders; immune disorders; and reproductive harm. This load of toxins found in humans is called "body burden," a concept that has long been ignored by industry and science, until now.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) did the first body burden study in 2001, and tested for 27 chemicals in blood and urine in 2,500 people. A second larger study by the CDC examined 2,500 individuals for 116 contaminants. This study led to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) releasing a warning that environmental chemicals increase children's risk of cancer, cognitive disorders and respiratory problems. Conservative institution that it is, the EPA estimates that we each contain about 600 chemicals in our bodies.

There are more than 75,000 chemicals licensed for commercial use in this country. They are found in cosmetics; cleaning products; furniture; carpets; building materials; toys; plastics - essentially everywhere. We inhale them, absorb them through our skin and eat them. Most of them have never been tested for safety. In 1976, 63,000 chemicals were grandparented in, and the safety requirements of chemicals introduced since that time are loosely enforced, if at all. We are operating on the principal that all chemicals are innocent until proven guilty. We are all exposed and become collection tanks for these compounds. What they do in our bodies is unknown. How they act singularly, or more accurately, in combination, is largely unknown. It is a good bet that they are bad actors. What the EWG would like to see is a policy based on the precautionary principle. This means simply that the burden of proof of safety be placed on the manufacturer before unleashing a new product into the market. Chemicals must be presumed guilty until proven innocent.

So, what's the good news? We are still here to do something about it. As practitioners of an indigenous medicine, we are uniquely qualified to look at this picture in a different way. Practicing wholistically, we must approach this issue on many levels. On the macro level, we must act socioeconomically, politically and environmentally. On the micro level, we can approach our patients and ourselves with the awareness that no matter what else is going on, we must consider detoxification as a therapy. It is simply a given that our body burdens are too high, no matter how well we have been living.

On the emotional and spiritual levels, we also are heavily burdened by the times in which we live. It is fascinating that the liver and kidney, the two organ systems most closely linked with physically cleansing the body, also are associated with imbalances of the emotions anger and fear. Aren't these the predominant emotional patterns seen when people are faced with uncertainty, unstable and difficult situations?

We know many techniques for cleansing and detoxifying. I suggest that these techniques should become much more prominent in our practices. Instead of only spring and fall cleanses, you might consider four cleanses a year, if appropriate. Of course, we must take into account the level of energy one has so we can detoxify without harming *qi*. The weaker someone is, the more gentle the process must be. Integrating daily practices such as inversion (upside-down postures); sweating; dry brushing; meditation; and consuming bitter greens, medicinal mushrooms and blue green algae, are extremely helpful in maintaining a gradual, consistent detoxification process. The flipside to detoxification is preventing or limiting the introduction of more toxicity as much as possible. Anything inorganic should be suspect. All commercial meat production is heavily loaded with undesirable additives. It is especially painful for me to come to the conclusion that eating fish has become a liability. It is tragic that such a healthful food as wild fish has now become so tainted, primarily with mercury, that it is no longer advisable to eat. Farmed fish is an absolute disaster, and no one should eat it. Please eat organic food as much as possible, and encourage your patients to do so, for the sake of our bodies and the health of the planet.

Cleansing the mind as well as the body is critical. Being alone in a natural setting as much as possible is one of the best ways we can spend our time and energy. We become more in tune with our natural selves so that we can better interact with others and with our environment. A corollary to this is meditation. If your patient doesn't practice meditation, I feel it appropriate for you, as the patient's physician, to facilitate the patient's participation. This is a sensitive issue and could be the topic of another article, so for now, I will just encourage you to pursue this path with discretion.

We all may be heavily burdened in more ways than one, yet we are still able to act for the benefit of others. If we are willing to act appropriately, future generations may still be able to receive their birthright of clean air, pristine water and nourishing food in the context of a sustainable, peaceful world.

MAY 2003