

## Any Questions ?

*Correspondents should give their names and addresses (not for publication) and include all relevant details in their questions, which should be typed. We publish here a selection of those questions and answers which seem to be of general interest.*

### Mulled Claret and Punch

**Q.**—*Do hot alcoholic drinks, such as punch and mulled claret, "go to the head" more quickly than chilled beverages of equal alcoholic content ?*

**A.**—The rate of absorption of alcohol from the alimentary tract is governed by many factors—e.g., its concentration in the fluid ingested and the simultaneous taking of food. At least a fifth of a given dose is absorbed from the stomach, and anything which increases the gastric blood flow will tend to increase the speed of absorption. It is believed that the carbon dioxide in sparkling wines acts in this way. It is therefore very probable that hot alcoholic drinks, especially if like mulled claret they contain spices, will act more quickly than chilled beverages of equal alcoholic content. It is improbable that precise observations have ever been carried out. To prove the point it would first be necessary to determine blood alcohol curves for several persons after drinking iced spirits and water. At a subsequent session the observations would be repeated with hot drinks of the same alcoholic concentration.

### Kissing Under the Mistletoe

**Q.**—*What is the origin and meaning of the custom of kissing under the mistletoe, and what are its medical hazards ?*

**A.**—(1) From time immemorial the mistletoe has been an object of superstitious veneration in Europe,<sup>1</sup> notably, as testified by Pliny, among the Druids in Gaul and the ancient Italians. The plant has chiefly been prized for its healing virtues, being variously thought a cure for epilepsy, ulcers, or barrenness in women and cattle ; in fact, among Swiss peasants mistletoe was, and possibly still is, regarded as a panacea for all diseases, at least of children. In other parts of the world mistletoe was recommended as a useful fire-extinguisher, a master-key to open all locks, and a lightning conductor.

The reasons for the association of mistletoe with Christmas are obscure, especially as the main Druidical festival at which mistletoe was gathered was on Midsummer Eve or Midsummer Day. However, in Wales and the North of England it was customary to give a branch of mistletoe to the first cow to calve after New Year's Day, to bring good luck or, better still, to avert the horrid effects of witchcraft. Perhaps this explains the use of mistletoe at Christmas-time. One thing, however, is certain : all cults of the mistletoe insisted that the mistletoe lost its virtue if allowed to touch the ground. No doubt that is why we still hang our bunch of mistletoe from the lintel.

It seems, then, that those who kiss under the mistletoe may do so for many reasons, perhaps just for "good luck," perhaps, like the ancients, to promote fertility.

(2) The hazards of kissing depend very much on its technique. The dutiful or chaste kiss, involving application of the lips to the forehead or a central or lateral part of the cheek, may result in contamination of the lips by bacteria causing dermatitis or furuncles in this area, but in the presence of these lesions the inducement to the operation itself is so much diminished that the question is scarcely worth considering. The full-blooded passionate kiss, in which lips are applied to lips with a varying degree of pressure and lasting for a very variable length of time, necessarily involves some exchange of salivary bacteria between the two persons concerned. How far this involves a risk of

transmitting throat infections it is difficult to say, since there appear to be no studies of the proportions of faucial bacteria found in the flora of the anterior part of the mouth. Possibly the incidental, although pleausurably less important, contact between noses is of almost equal if not greater importance in this connexion.

The risks of kissing, although admittedly serious, can be much exaggerated, and in connexion with some infections they are probably little greater than those of lesser degrees of proximity to the infected person. Many bacteria and viruses expelled into the air even by ordinary speech have considerable powers of survival, and one need only be talked at, without being kissed, to acquire them. It is of course worse to be sneezed or coughed at, and the probability is, although there are no experimental data on this point, that a kiss would be preferable to either of these experiences.

On the other hand, certain very delicate micro-organisms are unlikely to be transmitted indirectly, and can certainly be transmitted directly, notably those of Vincent's infection and syphilis. In order to avoid either of these it is advisable to know something about the person to be kissed. In the Christmas family party it may be assumed that you do, and this discordant and unpleasant note is introduced only for the sake of scientific completeness.

### Imported Canned Meat and Botulism

**Q.**—*What are the risks of food-poisoning (particularly botulism) from imported canned meat? Will any treatment of the meat in the home, such as in a pressure-cooker, eliminate serious risk ?*

**A.**—There are no recorded incidents in this country of botulism from imported canned meat. Other types of bacterial food-poisoning are occasionally traced to the contents of freshly opened cans, but more often the meats are contaminated after removal from the tin. The heat treatment of meat in a pressure-cooker will destroy all vegetative forms of bacteria and their toxins ; it may not, depending on the time-temperature relationship, destroy all spores.

Meats eaten *hot* from a pressure-cooker are likely to be completely safe, but if allowed to cool slowly and stored at atmospheric temperature there may still be danger from the survival and germination of spores.

### Holly and Mistletoe Berries

**Q.**—*Are the berries of holly and mistletoe poisonous? If so, what treatment is advised for children and animals that eat them ?*

**A.**—Neither the berries of hollies nor those of mistletoe are likely to have a serious poisonous effect. Holly berries, if taken in considerable numbers, are likely to be emetic and purgative. If the vomiting is severe, the best treatment would be to wash out the stomach. Though there is a considerable volume of literature about the pharmacological action of mistletoe, this concerns the extract which is made from the leaves, and there is no evidence that the actual berries themselves are poisonous. Any active principle which the berries may contain is almost certainly in the seeds and not in the pulp, and unless the seeds were thoroughly masticated, which is unlikely, as the berries are not especially savoury, it is most improbable that any harm would result from a child swallowing a few berries.

### Acute Poisoning in Children

**Q.**—*A doctor who is far away from hospital aid from time to time encounters cases of acute poisoning in children due to their swallowing some unsuitable substance, such as paraffin. What is the best emetic to use? Is apomorphine safe for children, and, if so, in what dosage? There are often serious practical difficulties in passing a stomach tube and washing out the stomach.*

**A.**—An emetic should not be used, and gastric lavage outside hospital should not be tried in a child with paraffin

<sup>1</sup> Frazer, J. G. (1933). *The Golden Bough* (abridged edition). Macmillan, London.

poisoning. The great danger of paraffin poisoning is inhalation into the lungs, and anything which may cause this should be avoided. The amount of paraffin a poisoned child may have in his stomach is most unlikely to endanger his life, but a teaspoonful in the lungs may be fatal. Neither gastric lavage nor emesis should be attempted in comatose patients, convulsing patients, or in those who have taken strong acid or alkali.

There is no really satisfactory "all-purpose" emetic. Common salt or mustard (two tablespoonfuls or one tablespoonful, respectively, to a glass of warm, not hot, water) are as good as any. Copper sulphate is probably unobtainable in an emergency, tartar emetic is dangerous, and the action of ipecacuanha is too slow. Tickling the back of the throat alone or after giving salt and water should be tried, and in this respect a "failed gastric lavage" may be of value. Apomorphine is rather uncertain in its action in children, and may fail to cause vomiting while at the same time increasing the intensity of toxic depression. It is particularly likely to do this in children who show, or may be going to show, shock or depression (e.g., after poisoning by ferrous sulphate or by sedatives), and in such cases it should not be used. Otherwise apomorphine could be used (1/60 gr.—1 mg.—subcutaneously in a toddler), but it has not found much favour in this country. If one injection of apomorphine fails, it should *not* be repeated.

Gastric lavage presents problems. It is a frightening procedure for a child, is very difficult if no medical help is at hand, and is not always effective in its object. Nevertheless, children may refuse to take oral emetics and apomorphine may be contraindicated, and in these numerous cases gastric lavage should be attempted. The child should be restrained with an encircling, tightly drawn sheet or blanket, and the tube is probably best passed through the nose. A catheter with extra holes cut can be used. It is advisable to wash with 20 to 40 ml. at a time, and a large syringe may help if the tube tends to block. If large quantities of water are used, the effect may be to drive the stomach contents into the intestine, which is undesirable except in cases of ferrous sulphate poisoning. Even a "successful" gastric lavage should not be allowed to give the practitioner a feeling of security. In a child who is already severely ill it may be better to send him straight to hospital for supportive therapy instead of spending time on gastric lavage.

#### Christmas Purgation

**Q.**—Should children—and adults—have a purgative after their Christmas dinner?

**A.**—For children the answer is emphatically no.

With adults the answer is slightly different. By the time adult life has been reached people should have learnt to control their own bowel habits, with or without the use of purgatives. If a grown man has found that purgation after a heavy meal prevents unpleasant consequences, he should be encouraged to continue with this habit, but on the strict understanding that he does not inflict his whim on others.

#### Going Home After the Party

**Q.**—Does going out into the cold potentiate the effects of alcohol? If so, by what mechanism?

**A.**—There is no experimental evidence showing that exposure to cold increases the effects of alcohol. But it is not uncommon to obtain a history of a sudden increase of symptoms on going from a hot to a cold environment. Thus, the driver of a car who has been drinking may experience nausea on getting out of his car into the cold atmosphere outside, may vomit, and then develop symptoms so striking as to attract the attention of the police. It is not easy to explain this effect. It may be connected with a redistribution of blood. Alcohol causes vasodilatation of the vessels of the skin, and when an individual who has ingested alcohol is exposed to cold for any length of time the internal body temperature falls. This would tend to

depress the central nervous system and add to the somnolence produced by alcohol. Alcohol is undoubtedly dangerous to those who are liable to be exposed to severe cold, and this is well known to Alpine guides and Arctic explorers.

#### Risks of Handling Radioactive Isotopes

**Q.**—What are the risks to nurses and doctors during the handling of radioactive isotopes for clinical use?

**A.**—The risk diminishes in proportion to the care taken in handling the radioactive material and should become negligible if the precautions recommended by the Medical Research Council and other bodies interested in the protection of workers are adopted (see *Introductory Manual on the Control of Health Hazards from Radioactive Materials*). These recommendations are stringent and call for constant vigilance, but the experience of well-run establishments in which these recommendations are carried out shows that the hazard is indeed negligible.

#### NOTES AND COMMENTS

**Disinfecting the Band.**—Mr. T. PEARSTON (Joint Principal, the College of Piping, Glasgow) writes: I read with interest the answer to a correspondent's query on how to sterilize a set of bagpipes ("Any Questions?" October 4, p. 789). The methods suggested to disinfect the various parts of this instrument are not entirely satisfactory and I am prompted to give the following technique used by the College of Piping.

**Method:** Ribbons, cords, and cloth bag cover can be sterilized by boiling. All parts of the bagpipe are taken to pieces and the thread used to render the joints airtight is cut away and burned. Attempts to sterilize the sheepskin bag by boiling or chemical disinfection are unsatisfactory; it should simply be burned. The leather valve in the blow-pipe and all reeds are burned. Sterilization of the wooden parts presents a more difficult problem as immersion in severe disinfectants such as lysol blackens the ivory and attacks the wood. It is desirable to sterilize the wooden parts in as rapid a manner as possible, as immersion in liquids for any length of time may warp the wood on drying. As noted, the most pathogenic organism likely to be associated with the bagpipe is the tubercle bacillus, and the destruction of this organism is the principal aim. Contamination would probably be from flecks of sputum blown on to the blow-pipe and other parts, and if disinfection is to be adequate the procedure would be to ensure that all traces of contaminating material are completely removed by thoroughly washing with soap and water, incorporating 5% "dettol." With the thorough removal of gross contamination, rapid disinfection with 5% dettol in methylated spirit would be possible and immersion for five minutes would be sufficient. After washing away the dettol from all parts, the instrument is dried with a clean cloth. New thread is wound round the joints, a new valve is connected, a new pipe bag is tied in, and new reeds inserted. The above method has been found satisfactory and does not damage wood, ivory, or silver. Certain types of varnish may be affected by the spirit, but re-varnishing can be done at a low cost. In the case of plastic mouthpieces and mountings, these should not be immersed for longer than the five minutes sufficient for disinfection.

**Correction.**—It is regretted that the word "linguets" was printed recently in the *Journal* (December 13, p. 1289) without the usual inverted commas to indicate that it is a registered trade mark.

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