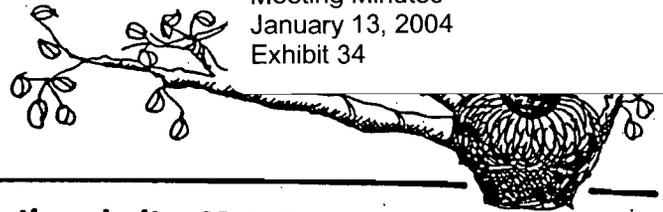


VIEWS FROM

ROBBY'S ROOST



Meth Labs' Contamination: Is it a Myth?

Two weeks ago, I had 3 "unusual" calls from emergency physicians; each was confronting the same epidemic problem in different areas of our state. For one reason or another, concerned authorities had busted a methamphetamine laboratory and, with much fanfare, had hustled up to 30 individuals from the lab itself as well as from nearby facilities off to the closest hospital emergency department via siren-screaming ambulances. The docs' common theme went "The victims seem to have no symptoms, no complaints. What do I need to do in the way of special clinical or laboratory testing? Just how long do they have to be observed? Am I missing something here?" Then, this last week, 2 new concerns were voiced by still other physicians, one in his emergency department and the other in her office. Each of them pleaded for help with words to the effect that "I'm seeing a child who was brought in by ambulance--he was living in an apartment down the hall from a raided methamphetamine lab. No, he has no symptoms whatsoever, but the 'experts' on the scene were adamant that he had to be screened for something. Just what am I supposed to do?" How would you respond?

As you might suspect, I've acquired some biases over the years and this area of concern is the clear focus of one of them. I happen to be convinced that since meth labs contain simple chemicals that are likely to be found in any high school chemistry laboratory--even though more of them have probably been spilled by the "amateur cooks"--exposure to them ought be inconsequential. Certainly, if some idiot should flip a lighted match or cigarette into one or another of the common solvents found in either setting, quite an explosion is going to follow. But, absent a big boom, who can provide me with a bonafide example of any documented clinical consequences attributable to such exposures to the solvents or any of the other chemicals to be found there. Some facts are clear--there is no strychnine, no thallium, no phtbalates, no dioxins and no other terrible toxins to be found in these laboratories. One can't help but wonder where all the meth lab fracas came from in the first place?

One possible explanation comes from a rumored tale of the 80's, from California no less. It seems that--allegedly!--a clandestine (which Webster defines as a secret, hidden and underhanded) methamphetamine lab had been discovered, raided and shut down. When the Drug Enforcement Administration authorities entered the facility to decide just what to do with it, they--in contrast to the agency's usual practice--brought along 2 agency attorneys. As might be expected, there were some "different" odors associated with the establishment but no other surprises--until a short time later when the attorneys filed workman's compensation claims alleging that they were suffering from "multiple chemical sensitivity" to the extent that they could no longer work! The story concludes that, to avoid a jacking up of future workers' compensation premiums, the agency no longer gets involved in day-to-day clean-up letting local health authorities do it instead. I've been told that the story spread like wildfire--and the myth of the risk of all those largely innocuous chemicals emerged to haunt us all,

apparently till Hell freezes over or a truce is declared in the war on drugs. Of course, were one to cat a ton of any of the simple chemicals alluded to, it would make one ill just as would 15,000 pounds of ALAR-treated apples.

I'm confident some of my readers will conclude that I must be exaggerating. I'm not! Next time you have a bust in your community, watch the clean-up crews descend upon the premises all dressed up in their moon suits. Be alert that your hospital's risk management gurus don't try to set up (as has been done here in our state) a special "decontamination facility" to shower such individuals before they are permitted to enter the emergency department. It plays big with the press; it attests to and reinforces all those threats prompting our expensive war on drugs--but absent radioactive alpha particles or bugs that can jump from the skin of 1 individual to another (?? smallpox) or, literally, a horrendous coating of a parathion paste, such efforts are really not at all warranted. The more they are employed the more the wrong message gets out about the purported risks of the chemicals involved. I could go on, but we all know that the "Worry Genie" is out of the bottle and ready to appear in your community.

As I've said time and time again, the issue is a tough one for you and for me--particularly in our era of cascading chemophobia. I don't envy the HAZMAT teams who get mixed messages at the very least; so, too, government officials also want to do the right thing and the Precautionary Principle is always ready and willing to be employed. I'd urge that we physicians use our God-given common sense and avoid over-reacting and making patients sick with what is clearly intended to be kindness. No one can deny that the amphetamines can and do make people sick; the AAPCC's TESS data report some 25 deaths in each of the last 3 years associated with them--small potatoes compared to alcohol but significant nonetheless. But for the chemical ingredients found in the drug labs themselves, there is certainly no comparable cause of concern.

One final point to chew on. Our state's clandestine lab clean-up coordinator has just distributed a clean-up standard for methamphetamine itself. He notes that "the effects of low levels [in the environment] are not well understood..." (properly interpreted as meaning that there is no evidence of any harm whatsoever!). He was disinclined to pick a level of safety below the minimal level of detection, though I suspect he'd like to do so, and he consequently settled on 5 $\mu\text{g}/\text{ft}^2$ as an achievable standard of cleanliness. My mother told me that since this fact is now in the scientific literature, it must be true! Unfortunately, both she--and he--have been wrong before. And I'm convinced that he, in pursuit of federal clean-up dollars along with the rest of us, is likely to be wrong again. Anyone care to cover that bet?

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