increased risk of accelerated loss in pulmonary function.

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Coincidence

Coincidence is a potent mechanism for the propagation and maintenance of myths. Many a time the juxtaposition of an unconnected event and the appearance of symptoms of an illness convinces the person concerned (not to mention his doctor) that the two are causally related.

A young man was taken on to help excavate the site of an 18th century infirmary cemetery. He had no previous experience of work of this type and needed constant reassurance that he would not "catch anything from the skeletons." All went well until he and a companion unearthed a lead coffin that was in poor condition and holed in a number of places. Both thought that they could smell an emanation from the coffin although later examination showed that the coffin contained nothing but bare bones. The young man was extremely anxious, and was sent home

by the site director. The next day he presented with an eczematous rash on both cheeks, which he was sure was the result of exposure to some effluvium from the coffin. He refused to work on the site any further and the director advised him to see his own doctor and ask for referral to a dermatologist. In the meantime, the director sought some information herself but met with a conspicuous lack of success from the sources she contacted.

Eventually the report came back from the dermatologist that the young man had indeed acquired an allergic skin reaction, not to noxious vapours from the coffin, but from his girlfriend's new hair spray. He, meanwhile, had found himself more congenial work, and the site director eventually managed to find a source of advice to whom she relayed this tale.

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