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Accepted 19 November 1990

Lead to unusual places

I suppose one could write a book about unusual occurrences of lead poisoning, and they keep cropping up from time to time. Every few months there is a report of someone being poisoned from contaminated home made wine or other foodstuffs and recently I remember reading about a family in the United States who had got lead poisoning after their father had enthusiastically rubbed down all the paint in their old house with dry sandpaper. This case first came to light when their vet diagnosed lead poisoning in their dog; the human doctors hadn't considered it when dealing with the other members of the household. Those who know something about the history of lead poisoning are rarely surprised by these revelations but I have come across one lead hazard of which I was not previously aware.

My first indication of it came when I was talking to a young man who was working in a joinery firm in the east end of London. His job was to feed wood through the circular saw and he came to see me because he had cut a thumb off and there was a question of the allocation of blame and settlement of damages. I asked him about his work and whether anyone else had suffered any injuries. It was all right, he said, but you had to watch out for bits flying off the saw.

"Why?"

"Because of the bullets."

"What!"

And then he explained that the wood they were using had come from France, from areas where there had been heavy fighting during the first world war and the trunks had bullets in them which had later disappeared into the depth of the tree as it grew. Then, when they came to cut the trees into planks, the saw would break if it came across a bullet, sending a piece of metal at colossal speed across the shop.

This seemed to be such an apocryphal story that I kept quiet about it for several years. Talking to a builder who was doing some work on my house, however, the conversation came round to occupational hazards, as it does, and he—without any prompting—told me the same story. He too had worked as a young man in a woodyard in which there had been bullets in the trees. This confirmed what I had heard before and I was now prepared to believe it. "And there was the musket," he went on. "What?" And he told me that one tree had been opened up and there in the middle, was a musket from the Napoleonic wars. At this point his credibility vanished; what next, a skeleton?

Can anyone verify this? Are there any other stories doing the rounds? Please let me know.

TONY WALDRON
Editor