INFECTIOUS DISEASES

Beyond textbooks

Although the overall incidence of TB is low in the UK, its re-emergence in some sectors of the population is ringing alarm bells, reports Daniel Allen.

Nesting between 'Plague (bubonic)' and 'Rat-Bite Fever' in a 1927 medical textbook, comes the following advice on diet for patients suffering 'Pulmonary Tuberculosis': 'One-hour-and-a-half after breakfast (so as not to spoil the appetite for luncheon), one raw egg, or two if possible.'

Another raw egg should be taken an hour-and-a-half after 'luncheon', the textbook prescribes, and yet more raw eggs in the afternoon. At bedtime, milk, and, somewhat predictably, another raw egg. Any time not eating raw eggs should be spent in the open air and sunshine.

While this particular textbook may be a little heavy on the raw eggs to be of any practical use today, it would be wrong to think of TB as belonging only in the archives. The opening of a new treatment centre at the London Chest Hospital bears testimony to that. TB kills around three million people every year, the vast majority of them in developing countries. In recent years, the West has been forced to sit up and take notice as the disease, carried on the back of spreading HIV and increasing poverty and homelessness, has begun to reappear.

Margaret Higgon, chair of the RCN's TB Visitors and Chest Clinic Nurses Forum, says there have been 66 new cases of the disease in the six months to June at the clinic where she works in south-east London. Fifty people in Nottingham contracted TB in the same period; concern over its spread has led to the first international TB nursing conference to be held in Germany next year. And in October, the RCN will hold its own conference when speakers from the UK and the Netherlands will chart the re-emergence of the disease.

Barry Gray, consultant in thoracic medicine at King's College Hospital, says pockets of the disease exist in Britain. The DoH and health service managers should remember this when epidemiologists say the disease is not a problem. 'I wish some of these people would take their heads out of their textbooks,' said Dr Gray.

the Lothian Health Board and the Community Drug Prescribing Service play a part in these sessions. NEEDACT, the ex-addicts organisation, and ex-prostitutes from the Centenary Project were most popular because they talked to the men in their own language. Some of the men who have completed the programme and are nearing release are being considered for jobs in similar self-help groups which will give them pride and self-respect, and help them in their battle to stay off drugs.

The AIDS Forum Executive visited some of the prisoners in various stages of withdrawal. Most seemed genuinely enthusiastic about the programme. As one of the prison officers pointed out, for many it was the first time they had learned anything about physiology – how their hearts work, what happens to their bloodstream when their injecting, and so on.

Alan Chisholm the Senior Officer who acted as our guide talked about his plans for introducing wood carving, painting and budget cookery classes. Many prisoners who were HIV positive, he said, leave prison, go back into the community and no-one wants to know them. It is important that they have acquired basic skills.

Saughton Prison is an example of what can be achieved with imagination and resources, ensuring that prison need not be merely a custodial experience, but one with genuine opportunities for rehabilitation.

We didn't agree on some issues – for example, condoms in prisons. One officer said he opposed it because prisoners could swallow drug-filled condoms or commit suicide with a condom over the head. To executive members concerned about safer sex, this attitude seemed antediluvian, but it was a useful illustration of the need to accommodate other peoples' reality, and to recognise that there is a great deal of knowledge nurses can give.

Marjorie Thompson is RCN AIDS Forum Adviser

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