

Spitting, Today and Yesterday

By Irma West, MD, MPH



THE DISCOVERY OF MYCOBACTERIUM tuberculosis in 1882 by the German physician, Robert Koch, led to anti-spitting campaigns and local ordinances in this country and beyond. It was assumed by medical authorities that spit was transmitting tuberculosis, the leading cause of death.

New York City enacted the first ordinance in May of 1896, imposing a fine of \$500 and a year in jail for spitting in public places, such as on sidewalks, in ferry boats, railroad and street cars and on their platforms. "No spitting" signs were posted.

Sacramento was not far behind when the Board of Trustees approved Ordinance 444 on December 5, 1896. Spitting on sidewalks, in public buildings or public conveyances risked a fine of \$5.00 and two days in jail. When enforcement was lax, such as at the Forester's Hall Dances, patrons complained. Hackmen, awaiting passengers at the entranceway, left puddles of tobacco spit causing the ladies to raise their skirts! Police Chief Dywer gave instructions to enforce the law at all places of amusement. (*Sacramento Union*, February 20, 1898).

This law remains on the books. In 2010 a high school student was cited for spitting on a patrol car and fined \$35 plus \$158 court costs. (*Sacramento Bee*, 5-24-10). An Occupy Sacramento protester was cited for spitting in the face of another protester. (*Sacramento Bee* 11-22-11). Apart from the anti-spitting ordinances, spitting on a person is battery, a misdemeanor or worse if the intent is to transmit disease. Spitting at someone but missing is assault.

Today the Centers For Disease Control and other public health authorities do not consider spitting on the ground a common method of transmitting tuberculosis or other infectious diseases, although there have been no studies to address the subject.

In the early 1900s, tobacco chewing and spitting were popular. Spittoons (cuspidors) were found wherever men congregated. Some chewers had personal spittoons. Former President Teddy Roosevelt's brass spittoon, circa 1906, is on display at the Panama Canal Museum at Seminole, FL. As cigarettes became fashionable and widely advertised as good for you, the ashtray replaced the spittoon.

Chewing tobacco and spitting have persisted in certain sports. Baseball players chew to relieve stress and dry mouth. In 1990, Major League Baseball reported on the hazards of smokeless tobacco and discouraged its use. Today, chewing tobacco by players during games is permitted in big league baseball but not in the minor leagues.

The spitball was banned by Major League Baseball following the death of a Cleveland Indian batter, Ray Chapman. His skull was fractured by a dirty spitball pitched at him during a game in New York City, August 16, 1920. Spit on baseballs makes them dirty, hard to see and they can slide off the bat.



Golfers are less tolerant of spitters. Tiger Woods was fined for spitting on the green. (*Sacramento Bee*, 2-16-11). Wrestlers spit into buckets before weighing in if they need to lose weight to qualify in a desired category. Marathon runners spit because they cannot

Comments or letters, which may be published in a future issue, should be sent to the author's email or to e.LetterSSV.Medicine@gmail.com.



swallow their saliva while breathing hard.

Young men carrying spit bottles and chewing sunflower seeds is a recent trend. Seed packages may proclaim, "eat, spit and be happy" and include instructions on how to be a cool "seeder." Carrying spit bottles and chewing sunflower seeds or tobacco is a common substitute for smoking cigarettes among wildland firefighters and marines in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. The firefighters must drink large quantities of fluid which produce excess saliva.

California's robust wine industry is responsible for producing volumes of spit during wine tasting. Wineries offer customers spittoons, sometimes colorful, next to their glasses.

Spitting contests are popular worldwide. Participants spit local products such as watermelon and sunflower seeds, cherry pits and peanuts. In Spain, it is olives. Tribes in Africa compete using Kudu antelope dung; their current record is 15.56 meters. At Purdue University's annual Bug Bowl in Lafayette, IA, a recent record for spitting dead crickets is 32 feet 1/2 inches. At the San Diego County Fair in June, 2011, an 11-year-old boy won his division title by hawking a watermelon seed more than 14 feet. His mother won the adult competition at 25 feet. Fatalities are on record when spitters choke on what they were spitting.

For centuries the betel nut, (actually the seed of the areca palm) wrapped in betel leaves with various additives has been chewed and spit by Pacific Islanders, Chinese, East Indians, Indonesians and many others. The seed contains arecoline, a stimulant which is

mildly addictive. Immigrants have brought the habit to this country, but it has not been popular with their children. They prefer the white teeth seen on television to the black stains on the teeth of their parents.

At Father Damien's church in Molokai, HI, holes were drilled in the floor next to the kneeling benches for leprosy victims to spit in.

Stone Age tribal beer making exists today among Amazon Indians. Women sit in a circle, chew grain and spit it into pots to form a fermenting mass. Ambient yeast adds to the brew which is saved for ceremonial and religious festivals.

Putting a "spit shine" on shoes has been a time-honored custom as has spitting on a handkerchief and wiping a child's face. The origin of the expression "spitting image" is foggy. Perhaps it came from 17th century England where it was said that someone was

Left page: St. Philomena Church on Molokai offered fluid holes in the floor for leprosy victims to discreetly spit out phlegm. Above: The author's daughter-in-law, Mary Piowaty, photographed this sign in her travels. Below: David brand sunflower seeds suggests the "proper" way to enjoy their product!





so like another that he/she must have been spit from the other's mouth.

Camels, cobras, chimpanzees, and the octopus are among the best animal spitters. The mythical fire-spitting dragon gave a name to the Spitfire, a fighter plane credited with winning the Battle of Britain in 1940, and holding Hitler at bay until the United States entered WWII.

imariewest@aol.com

References:

- Center for Sacramento History, 551 Sequoia Blvd, Smokeless Tobacco and baseball: a Short History, quitnet.com/library
- Eames, Alan. Secret Life of Beer, Storey Publishing LLC 1995
- hotelclub.com/spitting-as-a-sport 11-21-08
- mountainroseherbs.com/betelnut 2-6-12
- Municipal Archives, New York City, City Hall Library, 31 Chambers St., New York City, 10007
- Personal communication:
 - Zak Basch, spokesman, Sacramento River Cats.
 - Dr. Bob LaPierriere, Kirk Campbell and Kenny Meyer.
 - Grandchildren, Heidi, Michael, Mason, Molly, and their mother, Mary. phrases.org.uk/meanings 2-3-12
 - signonsandiego.com/news 6-24-11 (spitting contests)

Intolerance

By Robert Kahle, MD

WHEN DID WE FIRST HAVE AN indication? An inkling? Was it already apparent to us when we were developing in the womb? Some inherent transmission, some genetic transfer that let us know? Something that we could feel even in that wonderfully-cozy yet isolated place?

Did it first become apparent in the initial moments after birth, with the first breaths we took? With the first sights and sounds of life around us? Was it apparent in the initial reactions of those present as we burst forth?

Was it something that was nurtured in us over time? Something we took in as we suckled at the breast? Was it in the first independent steps we took, declaring our separateness, our otherness?

During our infancy, while fully dependent on others, was it just a by-product of our social environment? How others dealt with us or how we perceived others?

During childhood, was it learned in lessons in the

classroom or during our play at recess? From parents? From teachers? From ministers? From our peers?

When was it that our own individuality, our own unique character, those things that make us who we are, our own self-worth ... when was that first judged? When did we come to find out we were different? When did we first encounter intolerance, prejudice, discrimination, or bigotry? And in that, when did we have and express those same thoughts and emotions?

When did we become so different as to not easily tolerate each other? Are we so different after all? And aren't those things that make us unique worth consideration? Even celebration?

Must our intolerance grow ever larger and pass from generation to generation or can we throw off this yoke and learn to accept each other in love and patience? In consideration and celebration? As our world grows smaller, our survival may very much depend on just that.

robert.kahle@dignityhealth.org