

A Salty Lady



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I was a third year medical student on the Internal Medicine Service when a middle-aged woman was admitted to UC San Francisco's Moffitt Hospital with profound hypernatremia, her husband at her side.

She had been well and active until about a week before her admission, then began to have twitching muscles, confusion, and lethargy. She and her husband ate together daily and he was unaware of any increased intake of salt or salty foods.

He had taken her to see the doctor as her symptoms grew worse but the doctor did not find a clue of the cause by his history. He saw the twitching, confusion and lethargy but nothing beyond that was diagnosable through his physical examination. The physician also ordered lab studies and called her husband the next day as her serum sodium was 165.

Her doctor advised that she should be taken immediately to the Moffitt Hospital Emergency Room, which her husband did. In the ER, stat redraws of blood for a chemistry panel confirmed the dangerously high sodium level. She was then admitted to my Internal Medicine team to rehydrate her with non-sodium containing sterile water as well as to search for the cause of her bizarre condition.

They lived in San Francisco where the outside temperature is not very hot, even in the summer. They shared a bed and her husband said he never noticed signs of sweating, nor did she wet the bed—he believed he would have noticed—so profound dehydration from sweat or urine loss did not seem likely. Moreover, she continued to take in liquids as usual during the days before she fell very ill.

We never discovered the cause of her hypernatremia as she died the next day and her husband who was—as she was—an Orthodox Jew, refused an autopsy.

When I was a student at the University of California,



Santa Barbara in the first half of the 1960s, I had been intrigued by a course which was available called *The Bible as Literature*. I signed up for it because it would be very different from all the pre-med required courses of the time, and I loved old literature.

In one of our first assignments in that course we were told by our teacher to read Genesis, which we then would discuss in class. Genesis 19 told of the sinfulness of two cities, Sodom and Gomorrah, and their ultimate destruction by God. Only the good people, including a man named Lot, had been warned to leave the two cities. They were led away by angels who told them to never look back.

Only one person, Lot's wife, looked back... and was turned into a pillar of salt.

When I was assigned as a medical student to this patient, a woman who ultimately died from the high concentration of salt in her system, I could not stop thinking about this story.

Why? Because my patient's name was Mrs. Lot.