

Revenge of The Rats

An Unconscious Truck Driver, Rodents and a Medical Mystery



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I was called by my Internal Medicine Service resident early one morning, as I was the team attending and a middle-aged man had just come to us from the emergency room.

The story we got from the ER was that our new patient had parked his truck at night on a not-too-busy freeway near our hospital. A passing highway patrol officer saw through the truck window that the driver's head was facing down against his chest. The officer thought that the man was asleep or unconscious or dead, and he pulled up ahead of him, got out of his police car, knocked on the window and spoke loudly to him. There was no response.

The officer then opened the unlocked door. The man inside did not move.

An ambulance was called and took the truck driver to our nearby emergency room where he was found to have deep unresponsiveness and impressive jaundice.

The ER resident who saw him thought he had probable alcoholic hepatitis (common for us to see in our hospital ER). In addition, the man had red conjunctivae and widely scattered petechiae and ecchymoses. His heart and lungs were OK, and neither the liver or spleen seemed enlarged.

Initial labs were drawn in the emergency room, but—this having happened decades ago—the results were not as rapidly returned as they are now. A saline IV infusion bottle was started, containing vitamins and empiric antibiotics, and he was admitted to the Internal Medicine Service on ward East 8.

We had sent away for his old (pre-EMR) handwritten

chart, which arrived on East 8 later in the afternoon of the day I first saw him. I found, in reading it, that he had experienced a similar event several years before; according to that chart, he got rapidly better and was able to talk after several days. He had then described himself as a lifelong teetotaler who didn't touch alcohol, but the physician notes in that old chart made clear that they hadn't believed him.

It was no surprise that an alcoholic could lie—but two to three days later after we had him on our current ward, he was also much improved and showed no signs of alcohol withdrawal. He began to answer my questions, and again denied alcohol use. I quizzed him on other possible causes of hepatitis (the icterus was surprisingly getting better already) and he knew of none.

I found him to be a man dedicated to work and neither an alcohol drinker nor drug user. He was also without evidence of cardiovascular, pulmonary or GI disease, malignancy or any cerebral spinal fluid abnormality.

I finally asked him, thinking of other possibilities, whether he was exposed to any toxins in his work as a trucker. He said no. When I asked him about hobbies,

however, his face lit up.

"You have hobbies?" I asked.

"Just one," he replied.

"What is your hobby?"

"I shoot rats."

"You shoot rats?"

"I hate rats! Ugly vermin!"

He went on to tell me that whenever he had free



time, which was seldom, he would go to the rice paddies north of Sacramento, which was a favorite place for rats to dwell. He took a rifle with him, and every time he saw a rat he would shoot it. Then, when the shooting was done, he would go into the rice paddies, which were full of water, and pick up dead rats by their tails to hang on a fence surrounding the paddies as a warning to other rats.

For me, it came suddenly together, an “aha! moment.” A diagnosis of what could cause conjunctival hemorrhage, scattered dermal

purpura, easy bleeding, CNS changes, renal failure, and hepatic disease: Weils disease (Leptospirosis), which is caused by the spirochetal organism, *Leptospira icthohemorrhagica*! The Leptospire can live in the rice paddies along with the rats, which are unaffected by them.

Both time and antibiotics saved our patient's life even though we did not know, initially, what we were doing. He promised to give up his beloved (and only) hobby, and I asked him if he had a hobby in mind to replace his previous one. He said he'd think about it, and was

discharged.

I called him two or three weeks later. He felt fine, he said. I asked him if he had found another hobby, and he said he had.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I shoot bats” he answered.

“Oh, no! Bats? They can give you rabies!”

He started to laugh. “I’m kidding,” he said and I then started to laugh with him.

“OK,” he said, still laughing. “I lied. I’ve taken up target shooting.”

I have not seen him since.

