

Diogenes Syndrome

For several years we had a tramp, who pushed a supermarket trolley full of old articles and boxes around our streets. He used to wear a variety of old hats and on some days there would be a feather or odd bits of material in the band of his hat. He was sartorially on the outer edge of haute couture, oblivious to the world around him. All of us who have worked in casualty departments have seen similar people who have been living on the streets. It used to be called Vagabond Syndrome when unwashed patients came in with the dirt ingrained in their skin. They would be admitted for a few days and given a good bath and scrubbing and treated for infestations and then one morning their beds would be found to be empty. They had gone with the sunrise and were on the open road again. The *boemelaars* would spend the summer in Joubert Park in Johannesburg and then, when the winter came, they would follow the voices and head down the N3 to the beaches of Durbs. There they would sit on the sea wall overlooking the beach and have Addington Cocktails of methylated spirits delicately filtered through white bread (served, of course, with ice and a slice of lemon).

In 1975, Clark et al in the Lancet described a similar condition which they called Diogenes Syndrome, which is characterised by extreme self-neglect mainly in the elderly. The patients withdraw and live in domestic squalor and tend to hoard rubbish. Hoarding is called syillogomania, which is something the family accuse me of doing but I am in the process of plea-bargaining this down to bibliomania, which is the obsessive collection of books.

The condition is named after one of my heroes called Diogenes, who lived in the 4th century BC and who gave up his possessions and chose to live the life of an ascetic. He is one of my heroes for several reasons. Firstly he lived in a barrel by the roadside and when Alexander the Great (who we have mentioned before in this column) came wandering by, he asked Diogenes if there was anything he could do for him. Diogenes replied that, if he did not mind, would he kindly move to the side as he was blocking the sunlight. He was obviously a man of great judgment because, while watching an incompetent bowman at an archery competition, Diogenes walked over and sat down right next to the target, explaining that it was the only place he felt safe. He was also famous for wandering around the streets of Athens, in broad daylight, waving a lantern and announcing that he was looking for an honest man. Apparently he claimed he never found one.

Diogenes Syndrome may be a misnomer as the patients don't hold to these ideals and Diogenes definitely wasn't a hoarder. It is probably one of these complex disorders of ageing and may involve personality disorders, alcoholism, dementia and frontal lobe pathology. The people

who come in contact with them are usually the casualty doctor and the general practitioner. They are the wild men and women who come staggering into my rooms from goodness knows where. Perhaps they are from the Big Rock Candy Mountain.

In that song, you will remember, the hobo sang:

*"In the Big Rock Candy Mountain
You never change your socks
And little streams of alcohol
Come trickling down the rocks
There's a lake of stew
And ginger ale too
In the Big Rock Candy Mountain."*

In the next verse you get hens that lay soft-boiled eggs and there's a mention of the jerk who invented work. I have, at times, tried to join these wanderers and attempted to escape the conventions of modern life but my efforts pale in comparison to some of my patients who come in from the peripheral wildernesses. My escape is called going fishing.

I was once staying in a fishing cottage on a beach up on the north coast of Natal and came across some apprentices of the free life. One evening I went for a walk along the beach in that magic hour when the sun sets over the waves from the Indian Ocean. A little way up the beach, out of the dunes, came three ragamuffin white children pushing a boat towards the sea. They looked almost feral, burnt dark by the sun, long unkempt hair, no tops and only dressed in shorts. They pushed the boat through the waves and hopped in with their fishing rods. They were *kinders van die wind*. Perhaps they were scions of the *Strandlopers*, the beach walkers, of the remote skeleton coast. The beach walkers were boskopoids, who were ancestral to the San Bushmen. The archaeologists who excavated their graves found no traces of any kind of permanent structures; no weapons, no tools, no carvings and no personal adornments. The *Strandloper* gathered his food from the shore and slept in the sand. They lacked a material culture. Not a Mercedes Benz in sight. They were, perhaps, what the poet Dylan Thomas called "wild men who caught and sang the sun".

I must now stop this daydreaming about the open road. My receptionist has just rung to say the waiting room is full and I am three quarters of an hour behind.

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