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Ref. 7.3

8th March 1983

The Editor
Biology Curators' Group
Sheffield City Museum
Weston Park, Sheffield S10 2TP.

Sir,

Delusory Parasitosis

I was interested in Gerald Legg's article in the current BCG Newsletter. We have had one similar case in twenty five years. The facts, I believe are worth recording, since they are rather different from those described in the article. To cut short a story which could be funny were it not so sad, a little old grey haired lady (I was soon to meet her) reported by telephone that her house, which had a good address, was infested with insects. Since she was about to visit her widowed sister in Sussex, would I please do something now. She was clearly in some distress, and since it was time to close shop for the day I promised to call on my way home. Collecting a few tubes, a camel hair brush, a handlens, and a wife to chat to the old dear, I set off. I had established, during our telephone conversation that there were several large trees, "yes they might be lime", in her garden, I could only guess that she had aphid problems. The house was immaculate, everything which could conceivably shine did so, in a dazzling fashion. My attention was drawn, by her to endless wholly non-existent insects which, after careful scrutiny through a handlens, I swept into glass tubes. After a guided tour of the whole house, which was large, and very comprehensive sampling we departed. Having discovered, in a very roundabout way, a route to her G.P., we sent an urgent message that his patient would benefit from a visit. That, we thought was that. We were quite wrong. My telephone rang at 9.00 a.m. the next day, it was the little old lady, demanding a diagnosis and prescription. I hedged, praying that the G.P. would get the message and do something. Although the patient had not mentioned suicide, nor cats, nor fleas (perish the thought!) I was anxious for her welfare. The telephone calls were repeated at 30 minute intervals. After 11.30 they stopped. I sighed with relief. At about 3.00 p.m. I had another call, from Newcastle's Town Clerk. The little lady, despairing of this wretched Curator had telephoned the 'Town Hall', summoning help. The Town Hall sent the rat man. The ratman had, with more perception than tact, told this proud, if poorly ratepayer that, I paraphrase, "she was nuts". She was not happy and lost no time in telephoning the Town Clerk to demand the head of the rat man, and, if he could arrange it, the Curator's, on shields. So the Town Clerk telephoned me to try and find out what in heavens name was going on. I told him, he

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seemed to understand, anyhow he went away and I heard no more. There is a clear message here, if not for Curators, at least for Town Clerks, and rat-men.

There is a short post-script. Shortly after this incident, I met a GP friend and told him the story. Coincidentally he had, in his childhood known the 'patient's' children and could remember the discomfort of visits to their family house. Mother, it seemed, followed the young around the house, brushing carpets and shaking up cushions disarranged by small bottoms. Some thirty years later, widowed and her children dispersed, the poor little old lady had broken down. It was, he said, a fairly well-known condition.

No cats, no fleas, just a fetish for tidiness. Is there a message here also, or maybe I'm making excuses? Whatever may be the truth, it was certainly an enquiry with a difference and underlined clearly the messages in Mr. Legg's article.

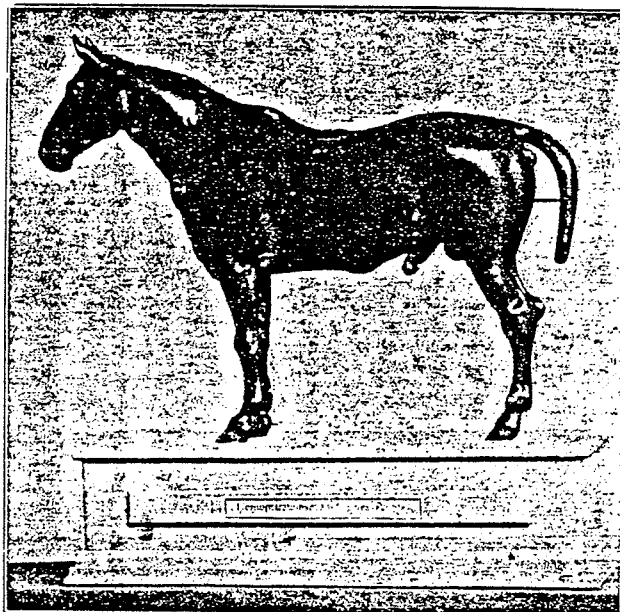
Yours faithfully,

A.M. Tynan

A.M. Tynan
Curator

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