

PARASITES

The Hidden Health Menace

"IF YOU KNEW SUSHI, LIKE
I KNOW SUSHI..."

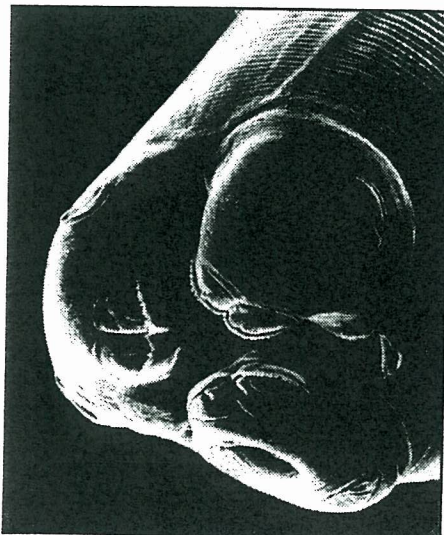
By Robert M. Hartung, Parasitologist

Parasites are here and are considerably more prevalent than we care to admit. However, because of the unsavory nature of the topic, they rarely become the subject of conversation over lunch, that is, unless you're a parasitologist; then you might spend a portion of the time really checking out the tuna salad sandwich you ordered. You see, refined folks just don't talk about that sort of thing. For the most part, it appears that many of us living in comparative affluence here in North America are under the illusion that the menace of parasitic diseases is of little consequence and significance in such a sophisticated and medically alert society — it's a problem restricted to "third world countries," whatever they are. Hence, there are few willing to entertain the idea that the potential source of their chronic discomfort could be the existence of a successfully thriving community of parasites living within. Even if we assume the ridiculous posture that everyone in North America is free of parasites, we would have to face the fact sooner or later we are economically tied to those areas of the world where the populace is not so squeamish in discussing their parasitic burdens.

Over half of the arable land in the world cannot be agriculturally developed because of the presence of four parasitic diseases: onchocerciasis,

trypanosomiasis, schistosomiasis, and malaria. A very significant portion of the world's starving masses could be fed if but one of these diseases were brought under control. The loss of manpower coupled with the costs associated with feeding these sufferers have crippled the economy of many a tropical and subtropical country. It is estimated that one third of all adult deaths occurring in Brazil are a result of Chagas disease, one of the many forms of trypanosomiasis. A recent newspaper article declared that there are presently 65,000 people dying from this dreaded disease in Honduras.

How can we say parasites do not affect us? Our national conscience



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cannot tolerate the idea of people starving when we have so much; yet when we provide humanitarian aid — what this country is most noted for — we do little to address the root cause of the problem. We must remember that self sufficiency and dignity are not the products of a dole, and to aid a country monetarily without tackling the root cause of the problem does little to really help our neighbors. Charity is wholesome and often does more for the giver than the receiver; however, when the cause of poverty, pain, and suffering is focused on and eradicated, the beneficiary is doubly blessed. Therefore, we have to face the fact that we are inextricably involved in the parasitic affairs of the world, and we will continue to carry a large share of the burden for some time to come.

Let's get right down to the issue. Are we really excluded from the problems parasites cause elsewhere? Not in the least! Each of us is constantly being attacked by one kind of parasite or another. Let it be known — all viruses are parasites. But even excluding the viruses, there is still a plethora of parasites that will make our lives difficult. These range from the one celled organisms, called protozoans, to the wildly diverse group of worms, and of course, let's not forget the fungi (e.g. *Candida*). The effects they have on us, their hosts,

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