

PARASITES

The Hidden Health Menace

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

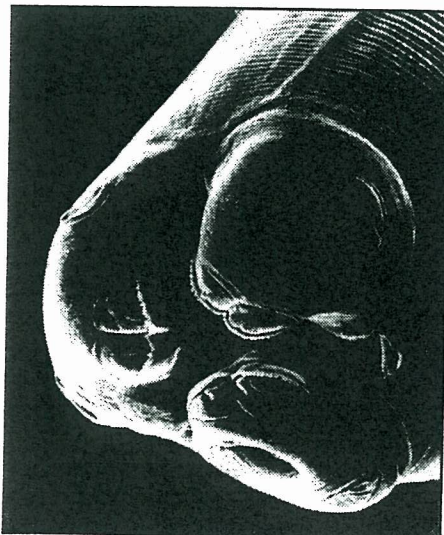
By Robert M. Hartung, Parasitologist

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



Anisakis Simplex

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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are as varied as they are. They range from mild gastrointestinal discomfort with little lasting effect to severe disease states, where morbidity and/or death are the anticipated outcome — sadly, for many, relief only comes in the form of death.

Parasites cause blockages in the intestine, severe tissue inflammations, asthmatic symptoms, congestive heart failure, impaired vision, skin eruptions, malaise, severe depression, loss of energy, anemia, etc. People have lost eyes because the larva (known as a sparganum) of the worm *Diphyllobothrium latum* was misdiagnosed as cancer. This same organism in its adult form as a tapeworm can cause a deficiency of vitamin B₁₂ in its human host, resulting in a pernicious anemia. For

those of us whose taste buds prefer the more exotic cuisine like sushi, sashimi, and ceviche (all of which are uncooked fish dishes), we run the risk of consuming a little roundworm, called *Anisakis* (fig. 1). This little critter has sent countless Japanese, doubled over in pain, to their local physician, with what our doctors might diagnose as simple gastric ulcers. *Anisakis*, after being ingested by an unwary consumer, attacks the stomach wall with a vengeance, causing a lesion approximately two inches in diameter. Most of our physicians are not adept at ferreting out some of these parasitic diseases; their experience and education, though extensive, were never adequate along these lines. Most of them only covered the topic of parasites while taking microbiology in college, and that was the end of

it. They are not to be faulted; after all, sophisticated societies don't have parasites, right?

Pinworms should be a concern to all parents. When a child is antsy, when they prefer standing and running around, disrupting the class, instead of sitting quietly and paying attention, then that child must have ADD (attention deficit disorder). Tell me, if your behind was itchy and irritated, and you didn't know how to describe your discomfort, might the real cause of the agitation be overlooked and a drug be prescribed to calm the child instead of killing the parasite? Our grandparents used to administer a dose of worm medicine to their children a couple of times a year. What makes us think the problem has disappeared?

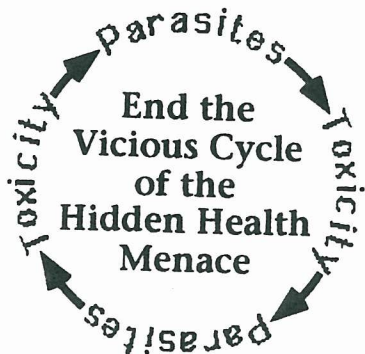
Pets are a constant source of joy and companionship to their owners, and I would never suggest that a person get rid of their treasure because of parasites. However, I do believe we become a little foolish when it comes to these animals. Roundworms, tapeworms, and protozoans can be easily transmitted to those in close contact with cats, dogs and other pets.

Not long ago, I had the distinct privilege of discovering in my own stool a proglottid from a tapeworm. Proglottids are segments of the tapeworm's body. I did something most of you wouldn't do; I fished it out. When I placed it on a microscope slide, I discovered something even more puzzling. This proglottid was from a tapeworm that is usually a parasite of dogs and is called *Dipylidium caninum*. The fact that I do not have a dog only added to my curiosity. This tapeworm lives a contented life in the intestine of the dog and the proglottids that are full of eggs are flushed out the dog's anus with the feces. Some of these very minute eggs get attached to the skin around the anus. Fleas in their larval stage do not

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