Toxic Oil Syndrome. Mass Food Poisoning in Spain. Report on a WHO Meeting Madrid, 21–25 March 1983. Pp.x + 92, illustrated. World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe, Copenhagen 1984. Sw.Fr.16.00.

On 1 May 1981 the first case of a disease, later to be designated as the 'toxic oil syndrome', was encountered in Spain. The epidemic reached a peak in mid-June 1981 when over 600 daily hospital admissions due to the disease were recorded. The epidemic then faded away although chronic cases continued to be discovered. Many cases of the disease were severe and needed intensive care treatment. By March 1983, 340 deaths had occurred and the total number of cases recorded exceeded 20,000. The severity of this epidemic prompted an international collaborative effort to establish the precise diagnostic criteria, mechanisms of pathogenesis, epidemiological characteristics and the identity of the causal agent or agents.

The World Health Organisation assisted this effort from the outset and the WHO Working Group on the Toxic Oil Syndrome, which included several UK experts, met in Madrid from 21–25 March 1983. The deliberations of this Working Party have now been

published as a WHO monograph, which gives detailed descriptions of the clinical symptoms of the disease together with supporting pathological data. In addition, there is a first hand account of the investigations that led to the discovery that unlabelled oil, sold as olive oil by travelling salesmen, was poisonous. This theory was rapidly confirmed by the action of the Spanish Government in replacing this oil with pure olive oil; the incidence of the toxic oil syndrome immediately began to wane. Unfortunately, it is still not known how and why the disease occurred as it did. Various tests on oils have been carried out to establish how denaturing and refining treatment could have produced toxins and what they were, but the results are inconclusive. Nonetheless, this Report is a well-written account of an, as yet, unresolved catastrophe which will be of interest not only to toxicologists and epidemiologists but to clinicians and pathologists as well.

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