



Ontario police warn of jimson weed dangers

Police in London, Ont., recently asked gardeners to destroy seed pods on any jimson weeds on their properties. The request came after at least 5 local teenagers ingested the seeds in pursuit of a cheap, legal high. For all of the teens, the trips ended in hospital. One 14-year-old spent a night in intensive care, drifting in and out of consciousness and hallucinating; 6 staff members were needed to restrain him.

The nearby communities of Brampton, Midland, Waterloo and Hamilton have experienced similar problems in the past 2 years, and similar poisonings have also been reported in Quebec. A year ago, the US National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information reported that jimson weed poisonings were on the increase among teens.

Detective-Constable Steve Cochran of the London Police said the plant is not covered under Canada's Controlled Drugs and Substances Act, but ought to be. "It's very dangerous,"

he said. "There's a sense of abuse, an element of danger." London Police intend to lay charges if sellers misrepresent the seeds as another drug.

Jimson weed (*Datura stramonium*) is also known as devil's apple, fireweed, stinkweed and stinkwort. It is both a potent hallucinogen and highly toxic. According to the Atlanta-based Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, symptoms of poisoning may include dry mucous membranes, thirst, difficulty swallowing and speaking, blurred vision and photophobia, followed by hyperthermia, confusion, agitation, combative behaviour, urinary retention, seizures and coma. As one cliché-loving nursing supervisor told the *Salt Lake Tribune* last year: "They are red as a beet, dry as a bone, blind as a bat and mad as a hatter."

All parts of the plant are poisonous, although the highest concentrations of the anticholinergic agent are found in the seeds (typically equivalent to 0.1



mg of atropine per seed.) A student hospitalized last month in London reported ingesting just 1 seed.

Recreational users may ingest seeds or prepare jimson-based tea or cigarettes. The plant is also used in folk medicine to make topical salves and poultices. Some teens learn how to use the plant through Web sites and newsgroups. However, most newsgroups accessed by *CMAJ* described it as a bad trip. "The high lasts about 36 to 48 hours," said one. "It will allow you to do very stupid and dangerous things." — *David Helwig*, London, Ont.

This month in medical history: the tragic life of Typhoid Mary

On Nov. 11, 1938, the most infamous typhoid carrier in medical history died after a quarter century of forced exile. Mary Mallon was born in Ireland in 1869 and worked as a cook for wealthy New Yorkers.

In 1906 she was hired by a banker living in a rented house in Oyster Bay, Long Island. When typhoid fever struck 6 of its 11 occupants, the property's owner hired George Soper, a sanitary engineer, to investigate. *Salmonella typhosa* had been identified in the 1880s. Soper was aware that it spread through contaminated water and suspected the possibility of carriers. He traced Mallon's employment history and discovered that typhoid had struck in 7 of the 8 families she had worked for, with 22 cases between 1900 and 1907.

In March 1907 Soper told Mallon she was spreading typhoid and demanded samples of feces, urine and blood. She refused. Soper enlisted the help of the New York City Health Department but it could not persuade Mallon either. Finally, under police escort, Mallon found herself in the Willard Parker Hospital, where high concentrations

of typhoid bacilli were confirmed in a stool specimen.

She was quarantined in an isolation cottage on the grounds of Riverside Hospital in North Brother Island, NY. In 1909 she sued the health department for her release, but it was not granted. However, a year later a new health commissioner released Mallon, based on her promise not to work as a cook.

She didn't keep the promise. Having eluded the authorities, "Typhoid Mary" resurfaced in 1915 when an outbreak of 25 new cases of typhoid occurred at the Sloane Memorial Maternity Hospital, where Mallon was working as a cook under the name "Mrs. Brown." She spent the rest of her life in isolation and died in 1938.

To the end, Mary Mallon rebelled against her incarceration. She maintained that she was healthy and never had typhoid. Her story continues to evoke conflicting emotions and is often cited during debates on the dilemma between the rights of an individual versus the rights of society. — *Dr. Venita Jay*, Toronto

Mary Mallon always rebelled against her incarceration.