

morphine disappointment and, more recently, the rise of SSRIs after the disillusionment with benzodiazepines.

Is this book relevant to anyone besides an historian of medicine? We pride ourselves in undertaking evidence-based medicine. Yet Medawar and Hardon remind us that our evidence base is often “evidence-biased,” and that in clinical practice our good intentions for rational practice are often outweighed by clinical realities and by the unrealistic hope that medicines will work without doing harm. More importantly, we had better read this book before our patients do and ask us tough questions. The whole thrust here is that physicians and even researchers, being human, have tended to see what they wanted to see and have not listened to contrary evidence. Some would argue

that books such as this make it more likely that patients will not take psychiatric medications that they need. In fact, most patients will take seriously the opinion and recommendations of a physician who listens to them, weighs their concerns carefully, is honest about what we truly know and what we don't, and agrees to work collaboratively. We are at greater risk of undermining our credibility with our patients by not considering contrary opinions.

In the past year we have had to come to terms with new information on the effectiveness and adverse effects of SSRIs in young people and with concerns about the delayed recognition of serious adverse effects of medications for other medical conditions. The issues are very much those described by Medawar and Hardon. Getting a

longer perspective on these phenomena may be helpful and produce wiser physicians. Therefore, I would also recommend *Medicines Out of Control?* for medical trainees early in their career. Ideally, however, a reading of the book would be accompanied by a mentor-led group discussion, as its message is so different from what is being received elsewhere, especially at the pharmaceutical-sponsored luncheons into which medical students are quickly initiated. That would be a shame, for those who are ignorant of history are condemned to repeat it.

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Room for a view

The mournful wood

When Vincenzo Suberati was a little boy, his widowed father would bring him into the wooded mountains around the Calabrian town of Nocera Terinese in search of mushrooms. The best time to go, Vincenzo learned, was after a thunderstorm, especially after lightning had struck the mountains. “Sons of the gods,” his father had called the mushrooms.

“Why do you call them that, *papà*?”

“Because, Vincenzo, they are born without seeds,” his father would tell him reverently.

Vincenzo would nod, feigning understanding. In truth, he wasn't sure why being born without seeds made mushrooms special. As far as he knew, there had been no seeds involved in his birth. Then again, he had heard old Padre Belsito say in a sermon at San Martino on All Souls Day that all persons were sons and daughters of the Eternal Father. He wondered whether perhaps lightning played a part in human birth as well.

Vincenzo loved the walks in the

mountains with his father, for they almost made him forget that he was lame, affected with weakness and spasticity of the left side as a result of cerebral palsy. Although walking in such terrain was especially challenging for Vincenzo, he knew that everyone walked awkwardly in the mountains. They were great equalizers of sorts.

Father and son found all different types of mushrooms on these expeditions. Vincenzo's favourite were porcini, a.k.a. *Boletus brisa*, and the elder Suberati taught his son that the best ones have large, meaty, light-coloured hats and are found in chestnut woods. When the mushroom harvest was finished, the two would repair to the family trattoria where, porcini being the specialty of the house, the father taught his growing son over the years how to prepare them in countless ways — as a salad, in various soups, cooked in sauces, baked, boiled, braised, broiled, grilled, roasted, sautéed or steamed. Vincenzo's favourite was *pasta e funghi*, or pasta with mushrooms.

Imperceptibly, as these things happen, Vincenzo took his father's place on the escalator of life, while the elder Suberati took the place previously occupied by his father. Vincenzo's father took comfort in the knowledge that Vincenzo would take over the family business when the time came, and contentment in his belief that Vincenzo had found some satisfaction in his livelihood.

His great regret was that Vincenzo had not found love.

It seemed that the girls in Nocera who interested him were not interested in him, while those who were interested in him were not interesting to him. The elder Suberati thought he could do little about the former, and so focused on the latter.

“Vincenzo, what's wrong with Rosaria?”

“Vincenzo, what's wrong with Dorina?”

“Vincenzo, what's wrong with Giovanna?”

“Vincenzo, what's wrong with Antonetta?”

The answers were all variations on a theme.

“She’s too fat.”

“She’s too skinny.”

“Her nose is too big.”

“She has ugly feet.”

Out in the woods, the elder Suberati told his son, “You know, Vincenzo, there are no perfect mushrooms.”

“She doesn’t have to be perfect, *papá*, she just has to be right.”

At the age of thirty Vincenzo abandoned all hope of finding a wife and having children. Instead, he doted on his nieces, the daughters of his younger brother Ortensio. He believed that it was impossible for a man to love even his own children more than he loved

them. Still, he regretted that he had not had children of his own, and that he had not given his father grandchildren.

But lightning struck improbably at the age of thirty-eight when he met Letizia, fifteen years his junior. She was a girl from the nearby town of San Mango D’Aquino. The first time Vincenzo saw her, the sight of her had taken his breath away. He knew at once that he must ask her to marry him — she might refuse, and he could live with the refusal — but he could not live with the not asking. So ask he did. Smiling, she declined; after all, she didn’t even know his name. Delivered of his self-imposed burden, Vincenzo was free to be himself, and Letizia delighted in his enthusiasm for the woods and for cooking (especially mushrooms), and in his unselfconsciousness regarding his paresis.

Vincenzo discovered Letizia to be stong-willed and mature beyond her years. They fell in love and married, and his beloved nieces were flower girls at the wedding. On the eve of his wedding, Vincenzo had cried on the shoulder of his brother Ortensio and wondered aloud why a girl as young and beautiful as Letizia would want him. Ortensio wondered aloud in answer whether his future sister-in-law perhaps had an occult problem with her eyes.

Alas, contrary to popular wisdom, lightning sometimes does strike twice, sometimes even *a ciel sereno*. Letizia died during the stillbirth of what would have been their first child. For the elder Suberati, who had been in poor health and who had seemingly been holding on for the birth of this

grandchild, the news proved too much. He died the same day.

They buried Letizia, the baby boy and the elder Suberati on a Friday, and Vincenzo returned to work at the trattoria two days later. So unexpected had the devastation of his world been that it was as if the damage had been inflicted with an infinitely sharp razor, with visual evidence of the wound preceding the pain by what seemed an inordinate period. The townspeople thought Vincenzo was holding up remarkably well for one who had been dealt such a cruel blow. Then again, some remarked, he was used to living alone, having married so late in life. Now, they supposed, that experience would serve him well.

About six weeks after the burial, after an evening thunderstorm, Vincenzo went into the mountains to harvest mushrooms. He found some in earth-toned woods unmarked by any path. Later that evening, as Vincenzo was preparing a plate of *pasta e funghi* for himself, Ortensio stopped by to check on his brother. He looked concernedly at the mushrooms, then at his older brother.

“*Che sono?*” he asked. “What are they?”

“*Funghi*,” Vincenzo replied matter-of-factly as he sliced them. “Mushrooms. Can’t you see?”

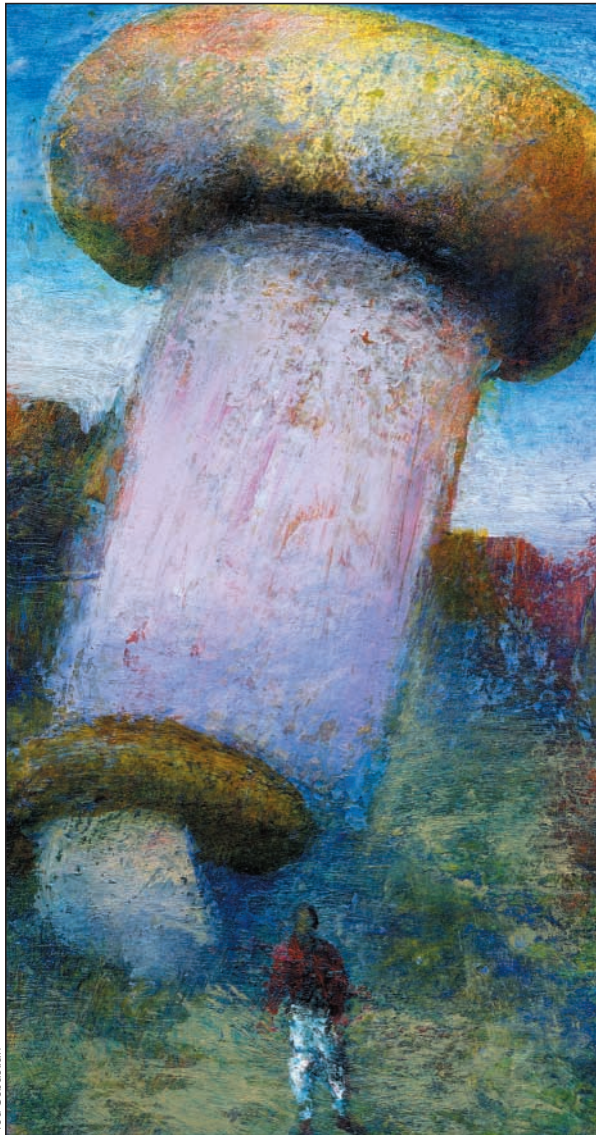
“Yes, but ...” Ortensio had not gone with his father to the mountains nearly as often as Vincenzo, and knew little about mushrooms compared with his older brother, but he thought he knew a poisonous mushroom when he saw one. Smiling somewhat nervously, Ortensio quoted his brother a southern Italian proverb in dialect: “*Chine muore dei funghi, non c’è nuddu che u chiange*” — “Who dies of mushrooms, nobody mourns.”

Vincenzo laughed. “*U saccio*,” he answered. “I know.”

Ortensio relaxed a bit. “But are you sure about those mushrooms?”

“Absolutely,” Vincenzo answered, honestly.

He began vomiting late that night, and soon thereafter the diarrhea came. His abdomen cramped, and he tried to



Fred Sebastian

take water, not to prevent dehydration (what was the point?) but to slake his thirst, but was unable to keep anything down. The next day he spent entirely in bed. Only once did he have to drag himself to the toilet to avoid soiling himself — he passed watery stool but almost no urine — and, in his condition, he experienced those few steps as the greatest physical challenge he had ever faced.

He awoke feeling much better the next morning. His nausea, abdominal pain and diarrhea were gone. He was thirsty, so thirsty, although not hungry. He drank water from the *vúmmula* — the clay jug he kept on the windowsill — chilled by the night mountain air. He washed and dressed and slicked his hair back with brillantina *Acqua di Venus* before heading off to work at the trattoria. He knew from experience that people dying of mushroom poisoning often pass through a period of well-being before the final assault on the liver, so he was not surprised. Perhaps this was the calm before the storm? Still, he was already feeling the effects of the *funghi*, for while he knew that his wife and child were gone, his emotional response to their loss was missing. Strange, he thought, that he should be able to recall all the intimate details of their short life together but have no emotional reaction to those recollections, positive or negative. The oppressive grief that he had been feeling for the past six weeks was gone at last, replaced by a numbness that was oppressive in its own way. He wondered whether he was better or worse off like this. He supposed it didn't much matter, short-lived as it was likely to be.

Over the course of the next day, as he worked at the trattoria, he noticed that he was steadily forgetting things about his wife and his life with her, starting with the most recent memories. By the third day, Vincenzo remembered his wife not at all. It was the only day since he had first laid eyes on her that Vincenzo has not thought of his wife. It was as if he had never truly known and loved her.

Over the ensuing days, the effects of the mushrooms began to wear off; the effects they had had on his mind receded, in the reverse order in which they had appeared. The experience was like losing Letizia and the baby all over again.

A week after his meal of *pasta e funghi* Vincenzo stood before his mirror in the morning. Clearly he had been mistaken about the *funghi*. They could not have been poisonous or he would have been dead by now. He had harvested what he had thought were rare *Tignosa di primavera*, a.k.a. *Amanita verna*, mushrooms that should have produced a clinical syndrome indistinguishable from *Tignosa verdognola*, a.k.a. *Amanita phalloides*. He chuckled at the irony. His father had always taught him to be careful to never mistake a poisonous mushroom for an edible one, and he had made exactly the opposite mistake.

But what mushrooms were these? Surely they were not *Lepiota naucina*, with which *Tignosa* are sometimes confused. No, he would never have made that mistake; besides, he had eaten *Lepiota* before without experiencing any of these unusual effects. No, the identity of these mushrooms was truly a mystery, and their effects mystical. Letizia's death had ripped a jagged hole out of the tapestry of his life (to borrow a phrase used by Thomas Murray a hundred years later), but at least Vincenzo knew what belonged in that hole. Under the influence of the *funghi*, the hole had disappeared, but the effect of its disappearance had been to make his life seem smaller, emptier. It was as though the effect of the *funghi* had been to approximate those jagged edges, transforming the two-dimensional tapestry into a three-dimensional morass, bringing into juxtaposition memories that had no business being juxtaposed. In the end, he realized that the inexplicable juxtapositions had borne witness to the existence of the cursed hole.

But now an idea occurred to him. Perhaps by consuming just the right amount of *funghi*, he could rid himself

of the insufferable grief the jagged hole had produced without compromising his awareness of that hole or his love for its former occupants, and without inducing complete emotional anesthesia. And so he tried gradually decreasing the amount of the *funghi* he consumed. Oftentimes Ortensio stopped by to see how Vincenzo was getting along. Unaware of his brother's mushroom experiment, he occasionally picked up a fork to sample the *pasta e funghi*, but Vincenzo would always whack him on the hand. "*Niente per te,*" he said. "None for you. Go home to your wife. She's waiting for you."

Each time Vincenzo ate the mushroom he was rendered at best completely unemotional. Finally, having decreased the amount of mushrooms in his daily allotment of *pasta e funghi* to microscopic proportions, all physiologic effects vanished. In the end, Vincenzo realized that there was simply no way to separate the desirable and undesirable Lethan effects of the *funghi*. His father had told him that there were no perfect mushrooms, and these were no exception.

The next morning, following a midnight thunderstorm, he found himself trudging up the mountainside toward the spot where he had found the mysterious mushrooms. He looked around and quickly located those curious mushrooms he had mistaken for *Amanita verna*. He walked past them and, further on along the trail, spotted some porcini, and nearby some *Amanita phalloides*. They were unmistakable. He thought for a moment, and then began his harvest.

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