

Sleeping Beauty Disease – An Outbreak of a Neurological Illness of Unknown Aetiology in Luanda Province, Angola

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Case series: A crisis intervention team from WHO was called in by the Angolan Ministry of Health due to an outbreak of an acute neurological disease. Symptoms reported included drowsiness, weakness, ataxia and coma. Most of the patients were directed to the hospital of Cacuaco. Patients who had improved a little were sent home again. Food supply was brought from home to the hospital. Blood, urine and food samples were taken and sent to Munich and London. Between October 18th and November 15th, 371 patients were admitted to Cacuaco hospital between 5 and 25 per day. The clinical examination in 30 patients showed the following: central nervous system depression with a GCS ranging from 7–14 points. Mostly children were severely affected, they woke up to painful stimuli but fell back asleep. Muscle tone was extremely weak. There were no signs of peripheral neuropathy. When patients had woken up they hardly could prop themselves up. They could not walk alone. They could not stand or hop on one leg. Blood pressure and heart rate were normal. Respiration rate was slightly decreased. It was impossible to spot the food responsible by cluster evaluation. It became clear that the symptoms observed fitted best with the uptake of an unknown GABA-ergic sedative. Drowsiness, ataxia, fatigue, hypotonic musculature, duration of coma seemed to be more pronounced than seen in benzodiazepine or GHB poisoning. Urine samples which were sent to Munich didn't show any organic compounds in GC-MS. In four of the five blood samples bromide levels between 1002 mg/l and 2451 mg/l (normal – 50 mg/l) were measured. In 5 other samples similar results were affirmed by a second laboratory. Salt samples consisted of sodium bromide. *Conclusion:* A so far unknown mass poisoning is described. Modern analytical measurements failed to detect the origin. Clinical observation helped to make the right diagnosis of a disease that reminded us of the fairy tale of the sleeping beauty.