

DOLL
Spanish oil

Sir Richard Doll, the eminent British epidemiologist, finally provided the statement the judges so desperately needed in Spain's so-called "cooking-oil case".

At the trial of 38 oil merchants he told the court: "I conclude that adulterated oil was the cause of the toxic syndrome". (1) With these words Sir Richard is the only scientist in the world to claim categorically that fraudulent oil caused the illness that broke out in Spain in spring 1981, quickly filling hospitals in Madrid and other towns. So far some 700 people have died, and another 25.000 are still suffering; many will be maimed for life.

Officially the outbreak started on May 1st 1981, (2) when eight-year old Jaime Vaquero died, and five of his brothers and sisters were hospitalized with the same symptoms he suffered from. For all of them the doctors' diagnosis was: "pneumonia". The Vaquero family lives in the small town of Torrejón, some 15 miles from the Spanish capital Madrid. Torrejón houses a large American Air Base.

Following Jaime's death the epidemic spread to other Spanish provinces and the number of cases grew dramatically. By the beginning of June 1981 hospitals recorded 341 admissions a day. (3) The typical symptoms most frequently encountered included fever; respiratory insufficiency, cough, exanthema, nausea, vomiting, headaches, muscle pains, diarrhoea and pulmonary oedema - amongst others.(4)

The rapidly growing number of patients plus the reports in the press and open speculation about the possible cause of the illness put increasing pressure on the Spanish government: first there was talk about "legionnaire's disease", later some obscure "mycoplasma"; and only 12 days after the official outbreak Dr. Angel Peralta already pinpointed the correct cause: an intoxication due to some organophosphorous insecticide. He was told to keep his mouth shut, and the guessing went on. (5)

And suddenly the puzzle seemed to be solved. Six weeks after the official start of the illness, on June 10th 1981, the authorities announced on the state-owned television that the cause of the terrible epidemic had been discovered: it was

adulterated cooking oil. Rapeseed oil, for industrial purposes "denaturalised" with 2% of aniline, then refined and fraudulently sold in open markets or by street vendors as cheap olive oil.:

The world owes this wrong and premature statement to the eagerness of Dr. Juan Manuel Tabuenca who entered into the medical history as "the father of the oil hypothesis". His conclusions, that surprised not only the public, but even more the doctors treating thousands of suffering victims, had one very grave, important and - as it turned out later - insurmountable snag: up to this moment no analysis of any kind had been done of any oil.

Hastily this little mistake was corrected. The best laboratories in the western world analysed supposedly toxic oil samples taken from households with patients and sent to them from Spain. They also fed a wide variety of animal species with this - according to the Spanish authorities - mortal oil.

The results were utterly disappointing. In the eight years since the outbreak of the toxic syndrome nobody in the world has been able to find the supposed toxin in the oil that could explain the terrible symptoms the victims suffer from. Nor has it been possible to reproduce the illness in the animals fed with large doses of oil containing amounts of aniline never found in any oil sample in Spain. None of the animals suffered any ill effects at all. And - though it might seem incredible - about 75% of all the oil samples analysed did not even contain any trace of aniline. (6)

And, contrary to everything, the symptoms of the victims in no way resemble those typical for an aniline, or oleo-anilide intoxications; the main one should be the fact that the blood changes its colour to a chocolate-brown. And that is one symptom the patients never had. On top of it scientists worldwide consider aniline and fatty acid anilides as "relatively innocuous". (7) And Japanese scientists have developed a pharmaceutical product to combat high levels of cholesterol in the blood, precisely on the base of anilide. (8)

On the other hand, the symptoms of the toxic syndrome do coincide, and many are identical to those described in scientific literature worldwide for intoxications due to chemicals of the organophosphorous family; be it pesticides or their

very close cousins, chemical weapons,(9) the aim for which this group of chemicals had originally been invented. The Spanish scientist and discoverer of the illness, Dr. ANtonio Muro, - the Vaquero children had been taken to his hospital - even put a name on the pesticide he accused: Namacur, produced by the German chemical giant Bayer. But Muro and others who dared to point out the obvious suffered the wrath of the administration, and had to watch helplessly how the victims were denied the correct treatment with atropine.

Then and now the Spanish authorities knew these facts. But they were determined to stick to the un-provable oil-hypothesis. This political decision was actively supported and backed by the World Health Organisation; the prestigious CDC, the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia, a Federal Agency of the United States of America and directly responsible to the government; and last - but not least - by the chemical company Bayer.

It was again Dr. Tabuenca who started the task of making the impossible oil theory respectable internationally. On September 12th the influential British medical journal "Lancet" publishes the Spanish doctor's fancyful explanations to link some sort of oil with the toxic syndrome. The pediatrician who points out in this article "by August 23rd ... there had been over 100 deaths" most certainly can not claim to be an innocent bystander. (10)

Being printed in the Lancet gives the fabrications about "toxic oil" a sort of legitimacy, and from then on, for the last eight years every possible effort has been made to prove the impossible oil hypothesis. Vast amounts of money have been spent; ostentatiously for investigation. More often than not to bribe scientists or to persuade them to doctor their findings (11) and to suppress or ignore documents that contradict this aim. (12)

The WHO very kindly had suggested the names of the scientists in the world who could solve the Spanish problem. It is quite surprising to find out that most of them are world-renowned experts in the toxicology of pesticides and herbicides. And it is even more surprising hearing one of these specialists sigh "it is a confounded nuisance that we cannot find the toxin in the oil ". And then, after being asked "And if it is not the oil?" to get the following answer: "But it must

be the oil, as those are the data and the informations we get from the Spanish government". (13)

Nevertheless, however hard they tried half way round the globe - there was no poison in the oil, nor did their animals suffer from its ingestion.

The epidemiologists claimed to have had much more luck. Thanks to the kindness of the CDC several of their specialists were lent to Spain to investigate in situ. These experts arrived already at the end of May 1981 in Madrid. For their investigations they choose the village of Navas de Marques, in the mountains. Their first study is a beauty - especially as it is the only one done honestly - i.e. before the decision that some oil had to be the cause of the illness. In this first report the scientists speculate with five possible causes: the pine trees near the houses of the victims, the little fish in the brooks, a new shampoo (unspecified) a new washing powder (equally unspecified) or even bleach! Understandably the authors do not like to be reminded of this study, so in the following months they produce five more on the same village; each time claiming that it is abundantly clear that oil was the cause. What is clear, even from the abstracts, which are the only papers available, as all the basic data are safely locked away in Atlanta, is the fact that the only thing that distinguishes the patients from their healthy relatives in any given family is the former passion for eating salads. And as oil is one of the basics in Spanish food, they have to admit another surprising but in this strange episode, logical fact: the more "toxic" oil a person consumed, the healthier he or she stayed. Logical, as from the start of the illness till the announcement about the oil, six weeks had passed, and as the illness was explosive, the ill family members went to hospital, stopped eating the supposed poison at home, but their healthy relatives went on dousing their meals with the same oil. (14)

In March 1983, almost two years after the outbreak, Spanish and foreign scientists met in Madrid for the first conference on the toxic syndrome called by the WHO. The meeting is chaired by the British toxicologist and pesticide expert Dr. Roy Goulding. In the early summer of 1981 the WHO had asked Dr. Goulding to act as general coordinator on the world-wide efforts to find the cause for the

Spanish illness. Very correctly, in August of that year Dr. Goulding went to Madrid on his first fact-finding mission. And at the end of his visit he told the Spanish scientist in charge of the local investigations, Dr. Manuel Serrano-Rios, to "stop looking for aniline and anilide in the oil, but rather to search for herbicides and insecticides and other known industrial toxins" instead. (15)

In March 1983 Dr. Goulding seems to have forgotten his own advice. And though the tapes of the meeting reproduce lively opposition to the oil theory amongst the scientists - mainly coming from his British colleagues - the assembly agrees to destroy something named as "Annex Nr.1" . And in an attempt to calm the excited voices he delivers an incredible statement: "I should like to take this opportunity to mention some suggestions made by the secretary's office. It would be a great pity if the official report that is to be published of this meeting would not offer any help to the Spanish authorities... What ever is going to come out here will have to be politically biased." (16)

But it was not quite so easy to get everybody to agree, even though the Spanish scientists taking part in the meeting had prepared a bait for their colleagues: out of 83 cases of toxic syndrome in Sevilla they had made 3, linking them with families who had somebody working there in an oil refinery. According to the doctored papers - for not saying falsified - when these patients fell ill, they were eating adulterated rapeseed oil from the refinery. But the analysis of the oils they were using at that time - official analysis - show that at that time there was only low grade olive oil being treated in the refinery ITH.(17)

The other "bait" was the case of the monastery in Casarrubios del Monte . Several nuns fell ill in late April, early May 1981. But the last time they had restocked their oil supply was before February 5th of the same year; i.e. long before the so-called toxic oil appeared on the market. (18)

Dr. Goulding should not have worried about the contradictions discussed during the meeting. The final report was put together in Copenhagen, in the WHO's Regional Office for Europe,

Nevertheless the meeting produced some recommendations to the Spanish government. As all experts present agree, they cannot find anything in the oil, nor do their

laboratory animals do them the favour to get sick from it, their main recommendation is to try and strengthen the epidemiological evidence - as everything depends on that science. (19)

This is duly done and a whole team is brought from Barcelona. This group spends the first weeks asking the government for the already existing papers - without results. So one of them, Dr. Martinez gets hold of the Epidemiological Bulletin the Spanish Ministry of health publishes every week. With the data he finds there he does a so-called epidemiological curve. To his surprise he finds, that the number of new cases had dropped spontaneously some 12 days before the official claim that oil was the cause. A fact, contrary to the government claims, that the illness dropped markedly from the 10th of June onwards. (20)

Dr. Martinez' wife, Dr. Clavera, also a member of the commission, investigates the commercial routes of the suspected oil. She establishes that in the north-eastern province of Cataliña 350 tons of the same oil had been sold without producing one single victim!!! (21)

These findings are obviously neither expected nor wanted. The couple is sacked, and the commission dissolved. It is again the CDC who comes to the rescue. Due to the Martinez-Clavera debacle the Spanish government, represented by the PNST (National Plan for the Toxic Syndrome) had signed a contract with the CDC.

This agency agrees to lend one of their epidemiologists to the Spanish government to "investigate in the oil"... (22) The gentleman chosen for the task is Dr. Edwin Kilbourne. He already knew the problem well, as he also participated in the reports on the village Navas del Marques.

Together with a group of Spanish and American experts - 20 in all - Dr. Kilbourne spends two years to produce a 40-page study on the subject. The paper is an exercise in contradiction. The authors write: "the most important contribution of this study lies in the strong association we demonstrate between TOS (toxic oil syndrome) occurrence and specific chemical parameters measured in food oil collected from families in an area heavily affected by the epidemic ... Although results of prior chemical analytic studies have demonstrated the existence of

contaminants in some oils collected from case households, data have not been sufficient to demonstrate a significant statistical link between illness and the presence of specific contaminants. We demonstrate such a link... that is there was a graded increase in risk with increasing concentration of the aniline contaminants." (23)

The authors try to prove this point with a graphic. But they must have overlooked a rather important point: from the 29 oil samples taken from households with patients and guaranteed as "case-oils", the oil that had made 11 people ill (of the 29; around 40%) contained no trace of aniline or anilide!!! (24)

And the first sentence of this "study" says: "The identity of the etiologic agent that caused the 1981 epidemic of toxic-oil syndrome in Spain has not been established". Nevertheless he goes on calling the illness the "Toxic Oil Syndrome!!!"

What Mr. Kilbourne did establish, though, is a new scientific method of undertaking the search for a causal agent in an epidemic such as this. The WHO's recommendations talked about the supposedly toxic oil as follows: "oil samples for future studies should be selected on the basis of the following criteria: the sample should have originated from the home of a patient with TOS; the content of rapeseed oil should be at least 40%; and the content of anilides should be at least 700ppm/g." (25)

Sticking to these criteria, Kilbourne would have had a hard time to find any oil sample. So he made up his own rules. According to this American expert, toxic oil that made people ill is that which was sold in "unlabelled 5-liter plastic containers with red top" (26)

Enter the eminent, world-wide recognized British epidemiologist Sir Richard Doll. In January he had been asked by the WHO to evaluate the then existing epidemiological studies on the Spanish epidemic. His report, dated October 1985, concludes that "There are, however, too many gaps in the evidence to allow the conclusion that oil was definitely the cause." And he goes on to say: "Such a conclusion could, however, be reached, even in the absence of toxicological evidence, if some of the gaps were filled". (27)

According to Sir Richard, these gaps were filled. Luckily, in February 1987 Kilbourne and co. finish their two-year exercise, and Doll receives a copy.

On March 30th 1987 the trial against the oil merchants started in Madrid and Sir Richard's appearance as an expert - like most foreign specialists who had worked on this subject he also refused to give evidence as a witness - was scheduled for the beginning of July. Shortly before, in June, Mr.Doll wrote an "Addendum" to his original report; both documents have been kept secret till two days before his court appearance.The addendum totally contradicts his earlier report, finishing with the sentences: "The new evidence has filled some of the gaps... With the addition of this new evidence, I conclude that adulterated oil was the cause of the illness", and to illustrate his about-face he reproduces the strange graphic from Mr.Kilbourne's study.

Sir Richard repeated his words in court. But he also admitted that he had not seen the basic data for the studies he was "evaluating", nor had he been shown any paper of the abundant documentation that dismisses the oil-theory as utter fabrication. Sir Richard also gave the very fitting 3 cases in Sevilla plus the ones in the monastery great importance. Nobody had bothered to tell him that they were pure invention. Nevertheless there seems to have been a slight doubt in his mind while writing his original report. In the very first paragraph he says: "In presenting the report I have assumed that the clinical, pathological, and toxicological features of the disease are not open to question". (28)

Comparing the report with the "Addendum" it seems that Sir Richard either refused to play ball or was not thoroughly briefed in 1985 as to the crucial role his evidence was planned to play in the long years of the cover-up.As the Addendum shows, this omission was corrected. These pages were written very shortly after Sir Richard received in May 1987, in Oxford, the visit from Dr.Roy Goulding and Dr.Edwin Kilbourne. According to the latter's statement in answer to written questions from defense lawyers, done in front of a public notary in the United States, this visit was undertaken " at the request of the "Liason Group"subcommittee of the WHO Scientific Steering Committee for the Toxic Oil Syndrome".... (29) With credentials like that, it is a safe bet to say the gentlemen most certainly did not only discuss the English weather.

In court Sir Richard went a step further in his interpretations. He gave another

thoroughly original and somewhat unorthodox explanation of the problem on how to define toxic oil and its relation to the illness: "I have been very careful not to say 'the oil that caused the illness'...but I said that it was oil that was later followed by the unfolding of the illness, which is something quite different." (30)

What Sir Richard does not say here is the undeniable fact, that the poor victims of the toxic syndrome also ate bread and vegetables, and salads, they probably drank water or wine before they were stricken by the illness. Or the small baby that died of this illness with only two months of age. It had never ever taken anything else but her mother's milk. The scientists analysing the milk looked for oleoanilides, but did not find them. What ~~they~~^{he} did find, though, were residues of insecticides. (31) Most probably this is one of the many documents Sir Richard did not see.

As he did not take into account the stacks of papers Dr. Muro filled during his investigations, working only with a few loyal friends, once he was chucked out of his post as the director of the hospital, where the Vaquero children's plight made him become the first scientist to investigate this strange illness. Talking with hundreds of patients Muro came to the conclusion that the cause of the illness were residues of organophosphorous pesticides in tomatoes. All the victims he talked to had eaten tomatoes, and less than 24 hours later they experienced the first symptoms. Starting from the shops, markets and street vendors where these tomatoes had been bought he traced the distribution routes to one vegetable auction house. Some 1083 farmers take their products to this place for wholesale. In his investigations he pointed to eleven farmers out of the more than 1000. From the field of one of the eleven, in Roquetas de Mar, in the province (32) of Almeria, came the toxic tomatoes. First Muro himself, and later on the lawyers of the accused oil merchants had repeatedly begged the investigating judge to conduct a thorough study in that area. Nothing was done in this respect till today, eight years later.

But Muro's documentation was evaluated^{at} for the trial. The Court provided funds to the other "dissenting" doctors, Martinez and Clavera, to do an extensive study for the trial. But in their sentence the judges reject all his findings, and

in a spiteful, undignified aside they malign Muro, who cannot even defend himself anymore, as he died in 1985. The judges write: "In the first half of May 1981 Dr. Muro made an enormous and meritorious effort to find the etiology of the illness. But thwarted by events, by the various hypothesis and by his own predictions, he entered into a grave and pathological crisis of anxiety". (33)

Sir Richard was treated much better: "In our valuation of the expert's views (expressed here) we have not only taken into account that the thesis this court of justice accepts was expressed by the majority, but also the professional background, the experience and the special field of the experts, proved by the publication of their works in truly scientific journals. And supporting this thesis ... scientists with the highest qualifications like Dr. Doll...." (34)

Sir Richard's stay in Spain was short. So he was not present in Court to hear the defense explaining that a few months before the outbreak of the "toxic syndrome" a strange accident had happened on the American Base. Military and civilian personnel suffered the same symptoms as were later observed in the Spanish so-called "oil-victims". And he did not hear the defense speculating with the possibility of a strong connection between the two outbreaks of the same disease (35) and the fact that Spain entered NATO officially in August of 1981. This move would certainly have encountered strong opposition if the Spanish public would have been told that on the base there might be some highly dangerous weapons that officially have no reason to be there.

Or maybe Mr. Doll was told just those facts when Dr. Goulding and Dr. Kilbourne came to see him in Oxford and thus prompted him to change his "evidence".

It served his purpose. Days before he arrived in Madrid, Spanish newspapers were full of stories on Sir Richard, extolling his scientific merits and never forgetting to say "he has even been proposed for a Nobel prize". The evidence of such an eminent man quite naturally became the base for the strange judgement. But Mr. Doll is - though in the company of many other so-called scientists - responsible for a temporary closing of the investigations into the real causes of the terrible illness, that goes on killing its victims at the rate of several deaths a month.

