

Of Mice and Men

Not too long ago, I am sitting in the waiting room at the Shirley Medium Skilled Nursing Facility, or HSU, when out of the corner of my eye I notice something that went scurrying across the floor and down the hallway, towards the back. All of the very, very sick patients are held back in that area. I stepped out and saw the little fur ball run across the boots of the guard that was standing there. He made absolutely no effort to stop the creature. I approached the guard and asked him what that was, and here is a part of our conversation:

Guard: "Oh that. That was one of the mice."

Me: "One of them? How many are back there?"

Guard: "Three I think – they're coming up from beneath now that the weather is getting cold."

Me: "And no one is trying to catch them?"

Guard: "(Shrugging shoulders) "They'll be putting traps out eventually. Why?"

It was at that point that I turned around and walked away. Why? He asked me. Well, I can think of a few reasons.

ALLERGENS: Any foreign substance that is capable of causing an immune response. The Allergen in mice that causes reactions is not on the fur or hair itself, but rather a sticky substance produced by the rodents' sebaceous glands. Allergens cling to hair, fur and skin cells and are distributed when this dander is shed by the mouse.

HANTAVIRUS INFECTION: An acute infection caused by the hantavirus which is transmitted from rodents to humans. Hantaviruses have been found in wild rodents, deer mice, rats and moles throughout the world. Mice transmit hantavirus via the respiratory route, and humans contract it through inhalation of infectious airborne droplets of saliva or urine or through dust from feces of infected mice.

PLAGUE: A bacterial disease that is transmitted among rodents by the bites of infected fleas. Plague may be contracted by humans when they are bitten by a flea that has acquired the infection from a rodent or mouse. There are three types of plague: Septicemic, Pneumonic, and

Bubonic. Of the three types, Bubonic is the most common. In the mid-1300's the "Black Death" spread throughout Europe and killed between twenty and thirty million people. In China, in the mid-1800's, the bubonic Plague spread for 75 years to every country, killing over twenty million people world wide.

The American Medical Association released guidelines which are intended to prevent infections carried by rodents (mice). Key points include: Storing all food in sealed containers and screening or sealing possible points of entry into buildings can help avoid exposure to rodents, as can professional extermination.

When working in areas where rodent excretions may exist, HEPA (High Efficiency Particulate Air) masks can be used to trap dust and prevent inhalation of dust particles that cause infection. Pouring bleach over a trapped rodent and its urine and droppings before removal can disinfect a possible infected animal and its excretions.

On May 6, 7, and 8, 2013, an inspection of MCI Shirley Medium was conducted by the District Health Officer from the Executive Office of Health and Human Services, Bureau of Environmental Health, and Community Sanitation Program. One of the violations listed for the inmate dining area was "Structural Maintenance": "Area not rodent and weather tight. Door to kitchen damaged". In the dish room, there was an "Uncovered electrical box behind the dryer rack". The doors are supposed to have weather-stripping attached to the bottom so that the mice can't slip through. None of them do. About six weeks ago, the dishwashing machine blew out, and the motor was fried and needed replacing. While awaiting parts, the maintenance staff searched for a cause as to why this happened. After 13 days, someone finally opened up the circuit board, whereupon they found a dead mouse that had been electrocuted, and was burnt to a crisp on the board itself. The mice are coming up through the pipes as well as the doors because of all the unsealed food trays that are being left out at night.

Three months ago, the electricians were summoned to the hospital to replace some of the burnt out lighting fixtures in the ceiling. An inmate worker went up the ladder to remove one of the ceiling panels, and upon doing so, he was showered in mouse droppings. It covered his hair. Eyes, ears, and mouth. This very same inmate became extremely ill for the next two weeks with some sort of a virus that they could not identify. It should also be noted that the same inspection report also violated the Hospital building for not having rodent-proof doors.

The administration has consistently blocked my friends and I from visiting our sick friends who are housed in the back of the HSU. We were told that because of how very, very, very sick these men are, that our germs might get them even more sick, and kill them. While my friends and I were physically blocked from going back there, I have yet to see one staff member try and stop any of the mice that are running around back there. I listed what the mice can carry into that place, and I am NOT a carrier of any of those germs. Yet another reason that we must always question those who tell us what to think.

The Hospital Building, the chow hall, the programs building, the visiting room, gym, and the Voc-Ed building are all temporary-modular housing units that were built to last 10-15 years – all of these buildings are celebrating their 24th birthday. And it shows. The roofs leak, the floors are rotting, despite how much plywood, star-plates, and tiling are layed over it. The walls are pulling away from some of the structures and black mold is rapidly growing underneath all of the buildings, mixed with dead animals. None of this is healthy. Putting lipstick on a pig does no good, nor does putting a band-aid on a bullet wound. There was a reason that Snake oil salesmen were successful at one time – because we can persuade ourselves of absolutely anything, from the efficacy of snake oil to the existence of God, which, to me, makes the world a more interesting place. But in this case, the facts are the facts, and there is no shame in asking for help. It's not that what you look at that matters, it's what you see.

As Told To:
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