

# POISONING BY FUNGI: INTERESTING CASES

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Poisonings by the Death Cap, although rare, are well documented in books (as are those by the Fly Agaric etc.), but there are some less familiar ones which have come to our attention in Edinburgh. Examples are the communal poisoning of youths in Monklands, Glasgow who had accidentally consumed *Inocybe* sp. mixed with *Psilocybe semilanceata* (Fr.) Kummer in search of a 'trip', and a dog poisoning caused by *Inocybe phaeocomis* Pers. (see *Mycologist* 8, 50 - 51).

One poisoning some years ago affected three young adults who mistakenly ate *Cortinarius speciosissimus* Kühner & Romagnesi instead of the chanterelle (*Cantharellus cibarius* Fr.); the two males in the party had to have kidney transplants. Related to *Cortinarius* is the genus *Hebeloma*, and *H. crustuliniforme* (Bull.: Fr.) Quél., the Poison Pie mushroom, is said to be toxic. I only know of a single case in Bristol and this was again an over-enthusiastic dog, which was perhaps attracted by the pleasant radish-like smell of the fruiting bodies.

The most common mushroom enquiry directed to Edinburgh concerns the Haymaker, *Panaeolus foenisecii* (Pers.: Fr.) Kühn. Very young children are tempted to eat this whilst playing on the lawn from June onwards, but probably the parents are more distressed than the children as it is not life-threatening. However, we have had three serious cases of poisoning by related fungi, the first by consumption of *Lacrymaria lacrymabunda* (Bull.: Fr.) Pat., the Weeping Widow\*, which made the heart-rate of the patient slow dramatically. The other two instances involved *Panaeolus sub-balteatus* B. & Br. where frightening hallucinations continued for some days in one case, and in another, caused the closure of a restaurant until the chef recovered.

There have been cases of poisoning in Glasgow caused by *Paxillus involutus* (Batsch:

\* Geoffrey Abbott, Faculty of Health and Social Care, Royal United Hospital, Bath, BA1 3NG is researching this mushroom and would like to obtain specimens.

Fr.) Fr., the Brown Roll-Rim, but we do not know what was eaten, or more importantly drunk, with the mushroom. Alcohol with *Coprinus atramentarius* (Bull.: Fr.) Fr. can cause problems of racing of the heart, flushing and excessive perspiring, but I have no first hand knowledge of this.

*Chlorophyllum molybdites* (Meyer: Fr.) Mass., which appeared recently in Edinburgh, is poisonous, producing symptoms similar to some collections of *Macrolepiota rhacodes* (Vitt.) Singer; these rogue collections have been recognised as a separate taxon; a former Regius Keeper of the Edinburgh Garden, in the company of John Ramsbottom, has good reason to remember it, having eaten it with adverse effects!

Some people undoubtedly are sensitive to some kinds of mushrooms, especially if eaten raw, e.g. *Lepista nuda* (Bull.: Fr.) Cke., the Wood Blewit, and we have had a good example in recent months of poisoning by *Laetiporus sulphureus* (Bull.: Fr.) Murr., Chicken of the Woods or Sulphur Polypore. With the former, two in 25 people react unfavourably, so if you are trying a mushroom for the first time even after its been identified by an experienced mycologist always start by sampling a small bit. It is said that James Needham (a founder member of the British Mycological Society) always tried out an unfamiliar edible mushroom on his wife first!

Finally it must be emphasized that mushroom identification is not a guessing game; it is based on the sound study of microscopic characters. These same characters can be used in searching for clues of poisoning in discarded meals, food scraps in the kitchen bin or in stomach contents. Blood tests can help identify a toxin and thin-layer chromatography may pin-point the same compound in extracts of the fungus but the final decision is based on a series of correlated microscopic characters.

Editor's note: This article is based on a public lecture by the author, given as one of a series of Popular Lectures at the Fungus 100 Exhibition, September 1996. Others in this series will be published in forthcoming issues.