

EPIDEMICS AND STARLINGS

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When four boy scouts of Troop 36 in Mexico, Missouri, recently developed high fevers, chills and coughs, serologic tests showed infection with Histoplasma capsulatum. There was no question of the epidemic proportions of the infection when it was found that 97% of 64 scouts "had positive histoplasmin skin tests, 60% had positive complement-fixation tests for histoplasmosis, and 47% had active lesions," as reported by Public Health Service epidemiologists.

Two weeks earlier, scouts from the town's four troops had volunteered to clean out an overgrown area which was to become a public park: Soil samples collected from the area showed 62% positive for H. capsulatum. Reviewing the history of such infections, the investigators (reporting in the New England Journal of Medicine) found that epidemics had been reported in Rockford, Illinois, in 1955; Mountain Home, Arkansas, 1956; Dallas County, Alabama, 1958; and Sturgis, Mississippi, 1959.

Until recently, three sources of histoplasmosis infection had been reported: visits to farms or prior rural residence; exposure in urban dwellings contaminated by bird droppings; and importation of contaminated farm soil or manure as fertilizers. The Missouri incident points up a fourth source: bird-contaminated, open-park lands within cities.

Epidemic histoplasmosis has been linked with the razing of buildings that had been favorite roosts for pigeons and starlings. The Public Health team's evaluation is that "city dwellers contract histoplasmosis by contact with point sources of growth of the organism and not by the casual inhalation of windborne spores disseminated throughout the city." The congregation of huge flocks of birds in urban areas, and their possible contamination of park areas and playgrounds, presents a new and difficult problem for health departments.



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