Tales of Kieran: The occupational physician’s odyssey

4. Vanadium

Kieran invited me to his college for dinner recently, and after he had proudly given me a guided tour of how academia lives, we had a very pleasant meal and some excellent wine. We took port with another Fellow from St Arrhenius currently doing some experimental work at the local power station. In these energy-conscious times, they have been trying to burn low-grade Venezuelan bitumen because nobody else wants it and it is very cheap. Kieran became very excited about this and the two were soon engrossed in deep conversation. I was happily dozing off when Kieran suddenly demanded my ‘expert opinion’.

‘You are a proper physician’, he said. ‘You must know all about vanadium pneumonitis?’ Somewhat taken aback and wondering how much of the conversation I had slept through, I confessed rather shamefully that I did not have the foggiest and, feeling slightly embarrassed in such cerebral surroundings, made my apologies and then for home.

Intrigued despite my soporific state, I consulted my medical textbooks at home but without much success. It was not until the next day in the hospital library that I managed to unearth any reference to vanadium at all. I discovered that Venezuelan oil derives from sea creatures particularly rich in vanadium. The oil burns to leave a large ash residue, exposure to which causes vanadium poisoning and a very bizarre collection of clinical findings. Good stuff this occupational medicine, I thought!

A few days later, while sat in the mess, I overheard a couple of juniors mention ‘the case with classical vanadium poisoning currently on the wards’. Never one to dismiss a coincidence, I immediately telephoned Kieran, to be told by his secretary that unfortunately he had been admitted to hospital with a chest complaint. Putting two and two together, I dashed up to the chest ward. Sure enough, there he was in a side room, oxygen mask on and somewhat red-faced when he saw me enter. Refusing to even open his mouth to me, he immediately pressed the buzzer and had sister usher me out whilst reminding her of medical confidentiality.

Determined to get to the bottom of this one, I hit on the brainwave of ringing the chemist we had taken port with at the college a few nights previously. I was a little surprised at the reception I got.

‘I hope you are nothing to do with that lunatic!’ he raved most unacademically down the telephone. ‘He almost managed to black out the whole of Linfordshire AND we nearly lost our contract with the power company.’ I assured him as best I could that I only knew Kieran as an occasional acquaintance, and he reluctantly continued. ‘Well, he absolutely insisted on entering the boiler to take samples for vanadium to make sure there was no health hazard when we entered. I wouldn’t mind but we had all been in quite happily without any adverse effects and the power station wanted to start the boiler up again. But no, he insisted—‘protecting university staff’, he called it. And then he had the audacity of threatening to call the unions if he was not allowed access. He was in there for over six hours with his sampling apparatus because each time he came out they tried to take the scaffolding down.’

‘But why didn’t he wear a mask?’ I asked timorously.

‘He did, but they don’t work very well with beards. Serves him right, if you ask me. The man’s a nutter.’

I planned out my next move carefully. Having found some tame medical students, I burst into Kieran’s room after sister accepted it was all in aid of medical education.

‘And this patient has very kindly agreed to demonstrate the pathognomic sign of acute vanadium poisoning.’

Kieran knew when he was beaten and obliged. The students presumably thought this was simply a rude, uncooperative patient, but that bright green tongue said it all!

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