Infectious Disease, 2000-Style

QUARANTINE! When I was a child in the late 40s and early 50s, this sign, in large red letters, notified passersby that an infectious disease resided in the house. Scarlet fever, whooping cough, and infectious hepatitis made the rounds among the schoolchildren, and the sign appeared frequently in our Kansas City, MO, neighborhood. It meant that no one could enter the house except the doctor, and no one could leave.

Today we have antibiotics and other miracle drugs. Quarantine seems like a very drastic solution. But it worked! The infectious diseases were stopped from spreading, and most of us got well. Penicillin was available for scarlet fever; but for the other diseases, rest, time, and a strong immune system were the best cure.

Rest was a major weapon for overcoming illness. If you were sick, you stayed home. Today, this simple prescription is a luxury few can, or are willing to, afford.

You have no time to be sick. Advertisements for over-the-counter flu medicines promise to cure your virus while you work. Unfortunately, what these medicines often do best is blunt the symptoms, symptoms that are caused by our own immune response to the infection. So, not only do we refuse to rest, we knock out the very system that is trying to overcome the invader, while we expose our friends, coworkers, and schoolmates to the disease. No wonder we get one infection after another! Antibiotics, the wonder drugs of the 40s and 50s, have lost some of their “miraculousness” because the organisms have learned to resist these attempts to eradicate them. Especially in hospitals, resistant organisms have emerged to plague patients and staff.

Now, this antibacterial fervor has been transferred into our homes. Household cleaning products are supplemented with antibacterial agents. In our zeal to sterilize the environment, we encourage these microbes to develop resistance to the antibacterial products. Our immune systems were designed to deal with the daily assault of the microbes to develop resistance to the antibacterial products. Our immune systems were designed to deal with the daily assault of the normal environment. If we “protect” ourselves and our children from normal contact with these organisms, we are subverting the very system designed to protect us. To become completely safe from microorganisms, we would have to move into bubbles with filtered air, sterile water, and food, a form of constant quarantine.

Let’s use common sense to be reasonably safe. Learning and practicing good hygiene will protect us far more than antibacterial toilet paper, dishcloths, and diapers. Use antibiotics judiciously. The best way to treat a cold is r-e-s-t— fluids and rest. Let’s keep our nasty creatures to ourselves.