A Probable Method of Transmission of Schistosoma Mansoni

BY

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A puzzling aspect of the transmission of Schistosoma mansoni (intestinal bilharziasis) is the means by which the eggs, present in human faeces, reach natural waterbodies. Many workers have favoured the hypothesis that infected stools are washed into rivers and dams by heavy rains or by floods scouring areas which are normally above water level. This undoubtedly occurs; however, it can account for infection of snails only during a few months of the year. It was suggested by Clarke (personal communication) and also by members of the Sociology Department, University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, that S. mansoni eggs might be present in faecal matter adhering to the peri-anal surface after defaecation. The peri-anal area is moist and warm and might provide a suitable temporary environment for eggs. Adherent material would be removed by bathing, thus providing a direct route into streams and dams. Since a large portion of the African population bathes and swims in natural waters, this would constitute an important type of contamination during all but the coldest months of the year.

With Professor Gelfand's permission, peri-anal swabs were obtained from patients in Harare Central Hospital, Salisbury, who were known to be passing substantial numbers of S. mansoni eggs in the faeces. Cotton swabs were used to cleanse the peri-anal area and these were rinsed in a small container of formal-saline solution. The presence of schistosome eggs, and also hookworm eggs, was demonstrated.

It seemed likely that the patients in the hospital were more fastidious than the rural African population. It also seemed likely that the fibres of the swabs used were retaining many of the eggs, thus biasing the results.

A further test was undertaken at Chipoli Farm, Shamva, in conjunction with research being conducted by the Bilharziasis Research Laboratory. A group of 26 African boys ranging in age from five to 15 years old was selected. Stool specimens had been examined from the members of this group and the results categorised as follows:

Negative: No eggs seen in a drop of centrifuged deposit.
1+: 1-5 eggs of S. mansoni per drop.
2+: 6 to numerous eggs per drop.
3+: Eggs seen in every traverse of the drop.
4+: Eggs seen in every field of the drop.
5+: Many eggs seen in every field.

Each slide preparation was scanned with a microscope fitted with a x4 objective.

The entire group of boys had already produced a stool specimen, sampled into a container for the purposes of the main survey. This procedure was familiar to the group and had been performed by them on a number of occasions in previous weeks. Thirty minutes after the last specimen was handed in, the group was examined directly. A blunt rounded steel spatula three-eighths of an inch wide was used to scrape the peri-anal area. Any material on the spatula was smeared directly on to a glass slide. A drop of normal saline solution and a cover slip were added. The spatula was cleaned and sterilised after each examination. The slides were examined with a high-powered dissecting microscope until an egg was found or the slide proved negative. The boys were not told that this examination was proposed, and it seemed reasonable to expect that they took neither more nor less care than usual in cleansing themselves after defaecation.

One boy was found not to have S. mansoni eggs in the faeces when his collected specimen was examined at the laboratory, and no eggs were found in the peri-anal skin scraping. All the other 25 boys had S. mansoni eggs in the faecal specimens. Of eight graded 1+, four had eggs adhering peri-anally; of five graded 2+, only one had eggs in the peri-anal smear; of seven graded 3+, four were positive; and of five graded 4+, three had S. mansoni eggs in their peri-anal preparations. Thus, of 25 African boys known to have eggs of S. mansoni in the faeces, 12 showed eggs to be present on the peri-anal skin over 30 minutes or more after they had defaecated and undertaken such peri-anal toilet as was their custom. There were indications that the presence of eggs was related to the personal hygiene of the individuals examined. Nevertheless, in most of the subjects the cleanliness of the peri-anal skin was surprisingly good on naked-eye examination considering the complete absence of any toilet tissues or of the paper substitutes thereof normally used in an emergency situation. None of the boys had the...
time or opportunity to wash himself after de-
faecation.

Preliminary work done in the Bilharziasis Re-
search Laboratory suggests that the distribution
of eggs on and within a formed stool is not
random and that eggs are to be found most
frequently on or near the surface. Further work
is required on this aspect and on egg viability.

The presence of S. mansoni eggs in adherent
faecal matter on the peri-anal skin seems most
significant. Such eggs are less subject to un-
favourable conditions than eggs within a stool
passed on the ground. Transmission by this
means requires only that infected individuals
bathe in snail-vector infested water, and this
occurs commonly in many areas. Furthermore,
transmission of this type is not seasonally limited
and does not depend on a series of fortuitous
events.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Mr. P. A. Garnett for his
excellent technical assistance, and to thank Dr.
D. M. Blair for his co-operation and encoura-
gement. This work is part of a study of the
epidemiology of bilharziasis which is supported
by a Rockefeller Foundation grant and which is
being carried out under the direction of the
Bilharziasis Research Laboratory of the Ministry
of Health, Rhodesia, and the Departments of
Pathology, Sociology and Zoology of the Univer-
sity College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland.