

Acute Mercury Vapour Poisoning in a Shipyard Worker—A Case Report

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Abstract

Acute mercury vapour poisoning is a serious, potentially fatal but fortunately rarely encountered problem. It is most commonly due to industrial accidents. The vapour is a direct respiratory tract irritant as well as a cell poison, exerting its greatest effects in the lungs, nervous system, kidneys and liver. We present a case of mercury vapour poisoning in a shipyard worker presenting as an acute chemical pneumonitis, which resolved with aggressive supportive therapy. Further investigations later revealed transient mild neuropsychiatric symptoms, and residual peripheral neuropathy. No chelation therapy was instituted. The detailed investigative work that led to the discovery of the source of mercury is also presented.

This case alerts us to the potential hazard to shipyard workers who may work in ships previously carrying oil contaminated with mercury. There have been no previous reports of mercury poisoning in shipyard workers. A high index of suspicion leading to early diagnosis and institution of appropriate supportive measures in suspected cases can be life-saving.

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