

Trouble foreseen

The diagnostic label of “psychopathic personality” has been applied to individuals who either suffer on account of an abnormality of thought and action or else make the community suffer because of such an abnormality in its midst. This involves serious irresponsible behaviour vis-à-vis other people or extreme aggressiveness towards relatives and neighbours. There is inability to tolerate minor frustrations, a tendency to act impulsively or recklessly, and a failure to develop and practise normal human relationships.

Psychopaths lack affection and empathy, are impulsive and are not constrained by any awareness of the antisocial nature of aggressive activities.

One factor that complicates the issue is that psychopaths are not lacking in social skills and may be charming and persuasive in pursuing their goals. This makes it almost impossible to deal with them until they have committed one or many serious crimes.

Some aspects of the problem of exposing psychopaths who might be likely to kill are discussed by a group of psychologists and psychiatrists in *Nature* for 29 May. They point out that psychopathic murderers are adept at lying and feigning the emotions in which they are deficient, so that their potential danger to others may not be appreciated by agencies engaged in criminal justice.

A computer-based diagnostic test known as an “implicit association test” has been used for estimating dangerously negative views that people may be keen to disguise, such as those about racial groups, homosexuality or obesity. Words classed as “pleasant” or “unpleasant” are designated in capital letters, while words denoting “violent” or “peaceful” appears in lower case text. The subject selects words by pressing keys. Most people see nothing incongruous in unpleasant and violent words, but are confused when pleasant and violent ones appear together. The difference in reaction times indicates the nature of the personality.

In a test involving 13 psychopathic murderers, 17 non-psychopathic murderers, 39 psychopathic other offenders and 52 non-psychopathic other offenders, without significant differences in intelligence quotient, psychopathic murderers showed a markedly different response from the non-psychopathic murderers. The effect is thought likely to be attributable to abnormal beliefs about violence rather than any non-specific factor such as poor impulse control and/or deficits in decision-making. Psychopathic murderers have diminished negative reactions to violence, compared with other criminals.

This demonstrates abnormal social beliefs in murderous psychopaths. But there may be two separate populations of psychopathic offenders, one deficient in

social beliefs with an increased disposition towards extreme violence, the other lacking the deficiency, and thus less dangerous to society. The test may become important in distinguishing between psychopaths liable to commit extreme violence and those who pose a lesser risk to their neighbours.

Space menace

The sudden appearance of the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in the Chinese province of Guangdong has prompted speculation regarding its origin. Is it a virus that has lurked unbeknown in some wild animal or other? It is known that coronaviruses are ubiquitous and responsible for illness in pigs, cattle, chickens, dogs and cats, and that some of them have been implicated in upper respiratory infections in humans. The proximity of humans to animals in southern China may have involved a viral recombination. Yet there are no clear indications to explain the appearance of SARS from the blue.

In *The Lancet* for 24 May, a letter from Chandra Wickramasinghe of the Cardiff Centre for Astrobiology and colleagues has drawn attention to the abrupt influenza epidemics in ancient Athens and in modern Europe and Alaska. The authors suggest considering the arrival of a virus from the stratosphere as connected with SARS. In samples drawn from an altitude of 41 km in 2001 many micro-organisms were detected. They estimate that a tonne of bacterial material falls daily on the earth, distributing some 20,000 organisms per square metre of its surface. It seems possible that pathogenic viruses may have arrived by this route. A small amount in the stratosphere would be expected to fall east of the Himalayas, where the stratosphere is thinnest, followed by other deposits in neighbouring areas. This sequence might explain the outbreak of SARS in China, and could warn us that other outbreaks are not impossible elsewhere in the world.

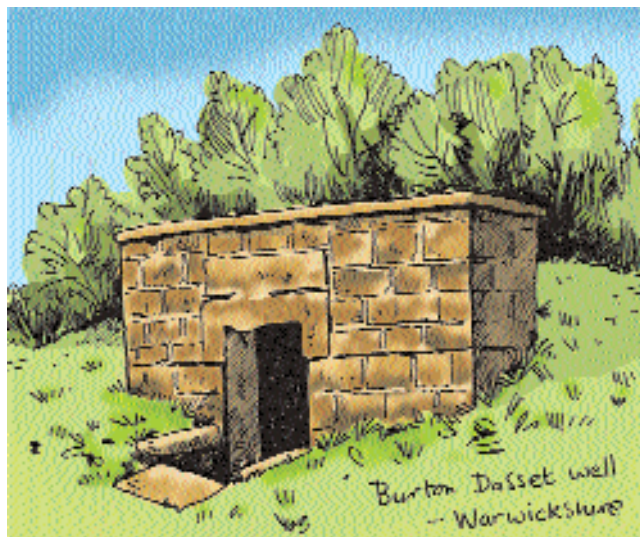
At a time when developed countries are keeping alert in case of a terrorist attack with pathogenic micro-organisms, it must be a sobering reflection that terrorism may not be the only menacing problem that we have to face and survive.

Lure of wells

Wishing wells are claimed to have become more popular in recent years than they were. However, centuries ago it was a common practice for people to drop pebbles or pins into ancient wells and springs at a witching hour such as midnight with some shape of ritual gesture. The pins were often supposed to be bent, though why this should be so is obscure.

More modern observances are greatly influenced by the idea of contributing to a charitable organisation through a wishing well situated in one of its properties, often the National Trust. In this event the contribution is expected to be coins of the realm, which can be retrieved by a representative of the management — unless regrettably stolen by some enterprising person devoid of conscience. Pins in such a situation are obviously without value, although they still seem to be part of the contribution.

The psychology behind the wishing well habit remains obscure. Certainly many people find a strange satisfaction in making secret wishes, accompanied by a ritual gesture.



Holy wells, associated with some religious figure, share the mystique attaching to wishing wells. They, too, have attracted oblations, including bent pins, as well as the feature of fragments of clothing attached to trees or hedges in the vicinity. I am often amazed on my walks to encounter scraps of fabric untidily flapping in the breeze near a tiny spring in the wilds of the country, and I fail to understand the mental processes prompting them. Holy wells, of course, were often situated in places of pilgrimage, where centuries ago pilgrims were sold bottles of the well water as therapeutic agents. In medieval times a contribution of some kind was *de rigueur* at the close of a pilgrim's walk, a habit going back to distant classical times.

Pliny in AD77 advocated that water be drawn from sacred wells and given to feverish individuals by way of cure. In our more enlightened times such a draught is rather calculated to induce than overcome a febrile state.