

## Perverse pleasure

In Bristol, in 1799, young Humphry Davy noted in his diary the curious sensations he experienced after inhaling nitrous oxide. Perhaps this experiment was one of his least hazardous since, in the interests of possible therapeutic approaches to lung disease, he had already breathed such dangerous compounds as nitrogen dioxide and its generator, nitric oxide. After a session with nitrous oxide, Davy reported “a feeling analogous to that produced in the first stages of intoxication”.

Among Humphry's friends at that time were the poets Coleridge, Southey and Wordsworth, who all felt a strange fascination with chemistry, encouraged by Davy. They required little persuasion to follow his example and sample nitrous oxide. As Southey wrote at the time: “Davy has actually invented a pleasure for which language has no name . . .”

Not everyone in the Davy circle shared this conclusion, and Peter Mark Roget, compiler of the celebrated Thesaurus of 1852, admitted that nitrous oxide gave him no pleasant symptoms whatever. However, over the following years the so-called “laughing gas frolic” became a popular feature of public chemistry demonstrations.

There is little evidence that nitrous oxide has recently enjoyed any significant role in “recreational” drug-taking. But a note has come from New Zealand, and is the subject of a letter by neurologists from Auckland Hospital published in *The Lancet* for 19 April. A case of spinal cord combined degeneration in a man aged 37 who presented with a three-week history of gait ataxia and paraesthesia of hands and feet was found to be the result of inhaling nitrous oxide daily for six months. His serum cobalamin content was low, and he recovered after ceasing to abuse the gas further and receiving cobalamin. His vitamin deficiency was attributed to its irreversible binding to nitrous oxide.

The case prompted an investigation of the incidence of spinal cord disease in users of nitrous oxide for recreational and non-medical purposes. Questionnaires were circulated to 1,782 first-year undergraduates at Auckland University, studying engineering, law and health sciences. Questionnaires were completed and returned by 1,374 students, of whom 780 were aware that nitrous oxide was used for recreational purposes.

Of the 652 men, 96 used the gas, compared with 61 of 708 women. The users were aged 17 to 48 (mean age 20), compared with 16 to 50 (mean age 19) for non-users. There was a preponderance among the users of white rather than Asian or Polynesian students.

The usual number of bulb containers inhaled in a session was two to five, with only a few using more than 10. The sources of the bulbs of compressed gas were stated as local corner stores, supermarkets and hardware stores. Most of the bulbs were intended for cream whipping in cookery.

It is significant that inhalers of nitrous oxide were more than five times as likely to think it was safe than non-users, and users were more than 10 times more likely than non-users to use at least one other recreational drug such as marijuana, cocaine or hallucinogens. They were also more than eight times more likely to have witnessed the use of nitrous oxide by friends. Physicians should be alerted to the possibility of nitrous oxide abuse when a young person presents with symptoms of subacute myelopathy but appears otherwise healthy.

## Welcome weed

We rarely look upon the common stinging nettle, *Urtica dioica*, as an asset in our daily affairs, but we are mistaken if we denounce it as a worthless weed and menace to our lives. I note from a few paragraphs in my local newspaper that indeed the nettle could offer a profit to those cultivating it seriously.



Farmers in my corner of the country are being encouraged to grow nettles as a crop, to contribute to the clothing industry. In this enterprise only the stems of the plant are evaluated for conversion into fibre, although the leaves also have their use, which includes the wrapping round a special type of cheese.

One important environmental use for the nettle patch is as a food for the larvae of butterflies, including the painted lady, small tortoiseshell, peacock, comma and red admiral. Nettle fibre from the stem makes a surprisingly strong and smooth-textured fabric, quite as good as linen from flax. This is nothing new, but has been found in Denmark in a Bronze Age burial where it served as a shroud.

Nettles have served also in other activities. In some areas the leaves have been included in various types of kale, when boiled with oatmeal, or included in soups or salads. A fermented nettle ale was used for the cure of jaundice. In many forms, nettles were

included in the diet to improve the quality of the blood and increase resistance to disease. Nettle tea was reputed to relieve stomach complaints, and was also drunk by daffodil pickers in the Isles of Scilly to relieve sore and itching fingers, the so-called “lily rash”. The fumes from smouldering dried nettle plants were inhaled for bronchitis. Perhaps the trickiest medicinal use of nettles was for rheumatism, where a bunch was sometimes used to whip the affected region, in addition to an infusion being drunk.

Nettles have also been used to dye cloth, and during the 1939–45 war they were collected in quantity to prepare a dye for military camouflage uniforms. Indeed, for a plant generally regarded as a pestilential weed, the stinging nettle has a remarkable range of virtues.

## No time to stare

The Welsh poet William Henry Davies was a remarkable man. Born in 1871 in Newport, he emigrated to the United States at the age of 22. He lived a roaming existence until, after an accident in which he lost a leg, he returned to England, where he indulged in tramping and writing. In his poem ‘Leisure’ (1911) he lamented: “What is this life if, full of care, / We have no time to stand and stare?” — words that were brought to public attention in a recent television advertisement and in the name given to a show garden at this year's Chelsea Flower Show. Davies's question sometimes recurs to me and I ask myself what, indeed?

One of the worst aspects of modern living must surely be that many of us consider ourselves lacking in energy and enterprise unless we act in a tearing hurry from place to place and from time to time. There is a deadly feeling that if we do not get our foot in first someone else will ease us out of a living. Meanwhile, many spend time speeding from A to B and B to C in mechanised sardine tins, oblivious of what and whom we pass en route. One result is that we have to suffer the neglect of people who claim to be serving us but fail to meet their obligations towards us and society in general because they have no time to perform their work properly. We utter “more haste, less speed” and “time is money” — both mantras being nonsense.

Why must we always be aware of an impulse to hurry? Probably because we are subconsciously scared of having time for reflection, which might reveal our deficiencies and tempt us to meditate on why we are here in the first place. Time is defined by philosophers as the dimension of change, to distinguish it from the dimensions of space, and we tend to fear prospects of change. So we invent a strange philosophy of deadlines, targets and statistical analyses in which our bureaucrats revel, and are encouraged by a promise of subsidies or threat of penalties to try ever harder to speed up, regardless of quality.