

# Influence of moon and tide

More and more attention is suddenly being paid to the twin phenomena of the moon and the tides. Not only health professions but also the authorities responsible for law and order are turning their eyes in the direction of the moon and its vagaries.

It was Robert Burns who lamented "Nae man can tether time or tide", and many unfortunates have sympathised with him. But we pay more attention to these natural phenomena than we used to do.

A waxing moon has long been associated with healthy growth. This is the time to plant seeds and to cut hair to promote health. It is also the time to undertake business deals to ensure success. Farm animals born at the time of full or waxing moon will thrive but warts should be charmed with a waning moon.

A full moon aggravates the symptoms of insanity. It increases the chance that an unstable person will commit violent acts. Curiously, recent crime statistics support this old idea and have prompted research into it. Moreover, it has long been believed that it is dangerous to sleep in moonlight, either indoors or out.

On seeing a new moon it is said to be wise to bow to it or offer other recognition. At the



same time it has been customary to turn over any money in one's pocket in the belief that it will increase as the moon waxes.

The moon's effect on the oceans is also prominent in folklore. Sick people on the coast cannot die until the tide is on the ebb. Birth at ebb tide is a bad omen. To cure a fever the patient should be placed on a sandy shore when the tide is advancing; when it recedes the fever will disappear.

Sufferers with whooping cough should stand at the edge of a falling tide and walk up and down until it starts to advance again. In some places a child with whooping cough was made to vomit by drinking sea water. When the vomit washed away the cough went with it.

The tides have been responsible for many strange customs, indeed.

# Harsh regulation of Chinese drugs

An editorial in the 7 June issue of *Nature* draws attention to a strange situation in China respecting drug regulation arrangements. The former head of the State Food and Drug Administration was sentenced to death in Beijing last month on charges of accepting bribes. Judicial processes in China prevent us from knowing the details but we do know that hundreds of officials have been accused of bribery over the years.

It is encouraging to learn that the Chinese government is taking steps to clarify its drug regulation process, but it is feared that the pharmaceutical industry at large may draw the conclusion that China is not a promising territory for investment in drug production.

As China tries to develop an international competitiveness, seeking collaboration and investment with the rest of the world, research in biology and genetics and innovation in biotechnology and pharmaceuticals is important to it. And from the point of view of global industry a sound and transparent regulatory regime independent of politics is called for.

Elimination of widespread corruption from drug regulation is essential. But in China there is a tendency to look for scapegoats and sweep these problems under the carpet. There is a need for scientific staff to be seen as independent, even when paid by the government, and also a reduction in the draconian methods adopted in a crisis such as the present.

## Could you be an Onlooker?

At the end of this year, the current incumbent of the Onlooker page is to put down his pen. For the next six months he will begin to provide less material until he stops in December. Tradition dictates that he will remain anonymous unless he chooses to declare his identity in the last column of the year.

However, we can reveal that he is now in the 10th decade of his life and has been producing columns week in week out, year in year out for more than 30 years — no mean achievement. We thank him for his contributions over the decades.

We suspect that our current correspondent may be irreplaceable. Nevertheless, we are actively seeking others to pick up the baton. If you would like to write on matters of peripheral relevance to pharmacy but of interest or entertainment to your professional colleagues, please let us know. Your identity will remain anonymous and we will create a suitable nom de plume to reflect your style.

Olivia Timbs  
Editor

# World climate change has led to an alarming reduction in rainfall in much of Australia

An editorial in the 16 June issue of *New Scientist* draws attention to the alarming effects of climatic change in the Australian continent. Over the past half century, comments Tim Flannery of Macquarie University, southern Australia has lost some 20 per cent of its rainfall, an effect largely attributable to global warming, and similar changes have been observed in the east of the country. The flow of the region's rivers has fallen in recent decades by 70 per cent from their previous figure. Apparently hotter soil temperatures have increased evaporation and transpiration. Meanwhile, the northwest has experienced increased rainfall. It has even been suggested that a large scale shift in population density might have to be encouraged in order to follow the marked alteration in rain pattern.

Industry, power plants, farmers and households are claimed to be paying too little for the water they consume. Some thrift in this direction may become necessary. Power

generation should take greater account of the possibilities offered by solar, wind and wave energy resources, and possibly cleaner grades of coal. Irrigation throughout the continent needs to be reorganised. Rice and cotton crops should be planted during the odd wet years and there should be no more permanent cultivation of grapes and citrus fruits, which at present call for year-long water supplies.

Cities should encourage more installation of water tanks for houses, since roof catchments are more efficient than dams in the provision of drinking water supplies. Desalination plants are helpful to ensure against drought. In Adelaide, Brisbane and Sydney a need for desalinated water is growing urgent.

Australia may make its global contribution towards the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. Like the US it has so far failed to ratify the Kyoto protocol, and this situation needs to be corrected urgently.